

LOVE IN THE TIME  
OF THE APOCALYPSE



# LOVE IN THE TIME OF THE APOCALYPSE

Gregory Blecha

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New York Lincoln Shanghai

## **Love in the Time of the Apocalypse**

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This novel is dedicated to Cheryl, the girl who asked me to write it, and written in memory of my brother, Bryan Blecha, a troublemaker nonpareil.



## C O N T E N T S

Chapter 1:	A Day in Las Vegas.....	1
Chapter 2:	What Not to Say, and When Not to Say It.....	10
Chapter 3:	Never Be Too Far From a Beautiful Woman .....	24
Chapter 4:	Shirts and Skins .....	35
Chapter 5:	If It Only Has One String, It's Probably Not a Musical Instrument .....	51
Chapter 6:	How to Cheer Up a Nihilist .....	71
Chapter 7:	Bomb Crazy .....	81
Chapter 8:	Proving I Love Her by How Many Women I Resist .....	95
Chapter 9:	Knowing Where You Want to Be, During an Apocalypse.....	115
Chapter 10:	A Day Only Poe Could Pen .....	138
Chapter 11:	A Shower Doesn't Clean Everything.....	153
Chapter 12:	The Irresistible Demise.....	163
Chapter 13:	The End of the World .....	169
Appendix .....		171





## CHAPTER 1



# A DAY IN LAS VEGAS

We were staying at the Amish, so of course there was no air conditioning. Jenny and Mark were smart—they were staying onboard the Titanic, where they were spoiled with service and great food and got to wear tuxedos and gowns, until the whole iceberg-shipwreck thing, which happened every night at nine. Had I my choice, we would have stayed at Vive la Revolution at the opposite end of the Strip, with hourly beheadings, peasant orgies, and Jacobean uprisings. But when was the last time I had my choice?

It was painful to watch the waiter shuffle slowly toward us with our beverages. He didn't have a limp as much as a crab's gait, as if he were walking with his leather coin purse clenched between his knees. The last time we had a round of drinks I had tried to help him, but he gave me such a display of veiny retina that I knew better than to try again. Instead I gave him a big tip.

"Do you think it's the *i*-word?" said Jenny, leaning forward, in a whisper.

"What's the *i*-word?" Char asked. She had opted out of makeup this morning because of the ambient heat. She was more beautiful without it; her skin was so smooth it reflected light. Jenny, on the other hand, came with full face paint that was beginning to blur on her face like a watercolor, a post-Impressionist painting. What would it be like having sex with her?

Did women know when you thought about having sex with them? I'm sure my eyes gave me away somehow, or the blood rushed from my face, or maybe I discharged a pheromone, like some type of male estrus.

"The *i*-word is *inbreeding*," said Mark.

"Shhhhhh!" Jenny warned. We all looked surreptitiously at our slowly shambling waiter. His eye sockets were enormous like fishbowls, and his lower lip protruded to such an extent that it nearly eclipsed his nostrils. He stared at the ceiling as if his neck were joint-less. Phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny. "He can probably hear you," she said.

"Does he have super-hearing?" asked Mark.

What made the waiter even more macabre was that, throughout the breakfast room, waiters with the same ichthyne appearance were shuffling tortuously toward breakfast tables. The hostess at the front of the restaurant looked identical to the cigarette-tray lady who worked the aisles near the wooden slot machines at the entrance to the casino. In fact, the woman who cleaned our room this morning was indistinguishable from the cigarette lady. Not once did I wonder what it would be like to have sex with her.

"I think the Amish gave in to too many gene experiments," said Jenny. "You heard about the gene experiments, didn't you?"

"What experiments?" I asked.

Jenny wagged her head from side to side, scanning the room for on-listeners. Then she leaned toward us conspiratorially and whispered, "Well, the Amish are really insular, so it's easier to study gene disorders in them than in the population at large, right? For example, there was some kind of gene disorder that caused the Amish babies to die when they were only a few months old. So these geneticists were researching the gene disorders, but I guess they started experimenting with treatments and the Amish didn't even know about it. The next thing you know, all these mutations started to appear. One of the girls at my office did an exposé on it."

"Do you think that's why the gaming commission let them open their own casino?" Mark asked. "For reparations?"

"You don't *get* it," said Char, who was rocking her glass in her hand, rattling the ice in staccato. "They are just so simple and pure; I think it's beautiful. I was talking to the blackjack dealer this morning, and she seemed so serene and blissful. They don't have the problems that we have."

"Bryan, would you ever sleep with your own sister?" Mark asked me, apropos of his inbreeding remark.

"I don't have any sisters," I said, "so I've always wondered if I would have if I had a sister. I was very close to one of my cousins..."

The waiter arrived, tray in tow. He began clearing away the coffee cups and glasses we had constellated around the table. I felt a kick to my shin beneath the

table, and that ended the sister talk with Mark. Char often used my leg as a form of punctuation; Mark however, was undeterred. Evidently he and a cousin had exchanged certain intimacies at a young age and he unfolded the story while the waiter delivered our plates. Of course the *waiter* wasn't sweating.

The waiter handed me a sheet of paper. "Few minutes late—be there soon. James," the note read. The Amish used a labyrinth of pneumatic tubes to communicate with all the other hotels in Las Vegas.

You had to wonder why the Amish chose the eighteenth century as the era they adhered to. Why not the fourth, so they could have chariots and breast-plates? Did they move the time frame every year? If the goal was just to be a few centuries behind everyone else, then they could have advanced to the nineteenth century and discovered electricity. What was it like to be an Amish inventor?

Char was right, of course. There was definitely a beauty to the Amish way of life. Or maybe I enjoyed being with her so much that it didn't matter where we were.

There were two extra plates—James and Dawn's.

"Should we wait for them?" asked Mark, poised to stab his fork into a pile of eggish. The waiter slowly retreated with our emptied glasses and the remnants of coffee.

"Might as well," Jenny replied. "It's not like our food is going to get cold."

Char: How was your hotel last night?

Jenny: It was great. Now that we've survived the shipwreck a few times, it's fun to watch the newbies. We met a couple last night and they were utterly shocked when the ship began to sink.

Mark: You can make a lot of money betting on who panics and who doesn't.

Dawn: Good morning, guys! Sorry we're late!

Kisses go 'round.

Dawn's forehead was beaded with sweat, and she panted, trying to calm her breathing.

"You don't look very well," I said.

"That's not what a woman wants to hear in the morning," Dawn replied.

"Are you feeling all right?" Char asked.

"I'm okay. It's just so hot! Why did we have to meet at the one place in town without air conditioning?"

"Are you pregnant or something?" I asked.

"That's all I need," she said, "to violate the Zero Child Policy."

Dawn had a tendency to be a drama queen. I did not mix well with drama queens. That's why I was so happy to be with Char.

“Look,” said James, sporting new scratch marks on his arm. “Ocelot”, he explained, exuding pride.

They were staying in the Jungle Love, which was way off-Strip. Yesterday he had been bitten by an agouti but was less salutary about it, since it was evidently a foraging rodent and not at all a predator.

As they sat, it was time to sample my breakfast—a bowl of fresh fruit, in my case, topped with some type of cream and cereal fragments. Where had they gotten the milk? Was it harvested from a non-ruminant species of lactating mammal, such as the agouti, or did it come from the Mormon stockpiles?

Char leaned back in her chair, using my left shoulder as a backrest while she slowly spooned cereal fragments to her mouth. This reduced me to spooning with my right hand.

“I love Amish food,” James volunteered.

His plate was mostly synthetic food and looked pretty nonsectarian to me, but I said nothing.

“So what do we want to do today?”

Phrases like “shopping,” “casinos,” and “go to the spa” were shouted with equal enthusiasm, but none were popular enough to draw a second. I was getting tired of the Strip. No matter where you went, the overhead canopy was painted to show a permanent pre-dusk sky. “Crepuscular. Crepuscular,” I told everyone, finally able to find a use for the term.

“What about driving out to Hoover Dam?” Jenny asked.

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” I said.

“I would love that!” Char added. “I really need to see daylight.”

“Well, as long as we hit the casinos when we get back, I’m happy,” said Mark.

“And the spas.”

And get our bums wiped, I said, but to myself, for fear of irking the missus.

“What should we pack for lunch?”

Whatever was in our pockets, I thought. No further planning required. Nonetheless, a discourse ensued on the merits of various plates, as if we were planning for surgery rather than carryout.

There was an interesting assortment of patrons breakfasting at the Amish. You could tell who the Americans were—the swarthy protein-eating types, as wide as they were tall, surrounded by machines and wagons to motor themselves about off-foot; the waiters barely had ingress. The more corpulent the populace became, of course, the more the rest of us had to resort to stomach crunches, implants, and cosmetic surgery.

It seemed odd that no matter how squalid the country grew, there were those of us who were still affluent enough to throw away our money in Vegas. You heard stories of cities that collapsed into chaos and feudalism, sans law, sans medicine, sans plumbing, while we bourgeoisie built wider streets, more opulent towers, and massive sports arenas. I'd always wanted to do something about it, like Jenny or Char, but in a way you needed the earners, too, to keep capitalism flowing. Without big earners there would be no one to tax, and without taxes there would be no one to bribe the government to leave us all alone. Sometimes I consoled myself with this rhetoric, but at other times I swore to myself I'd do something to balance the inequities.

There was a man scribbling furiously on his tablecloth, looking to the air for inspiration, then scribbling more vigorously. He was probably calculating his gaming odds. Beside him was an older couple arguing over their losings. Not once did I wonder what it would be like to have sex with them.

\* \* \* \*

We rode down US 93 on three rented motorcycles. We had the road to ourselves; not another vehicle was in sight. It was obvious why the rental guy had wanted to charge us twice the price when we told him we were heading to the dam. He was paranoid that we would be shot at or ride over a land mine, and then our grieving heirs would sue him.

No clouds, ambient blue beneath the golden roof of the sun. Char's arms were wrapped around my waist, more for intimacy than support. She hummed "The Girl from Ipanema" while I focused on keeping the bike upright. Where was Ipanema? Was there only one girl from Ipanema, or were there more?

We drove over a bridge where a lake had once been (witness the wrecked, overturned hulls of pleasure boats). Along the basin of the lake it looked like target practice; smashed cars, shattered buildings, but once, I am sure, it had been a cozy little hamlet. It's funny—I hadn't seen the Vegas postcards of *this*.

Then there were a few miles of nothing. Char was working on the words to the song, "Is it 'tall and tan and soft and lovely' or 'tall and young and soft and tender?'" she asked.

"Don't ask me—I didn't even know the word was Ipanema."

"Well, what did you think it was, then?"

"Well, I thought it was Ipanema...but I thought I was just making it up. I didn't know Ipanema was actually a word."

"You're just no good at this," she said. "It's not a skill you need right now, but when you get older, it's a skill you'll definitely need..."

Char had a log-cabin vision of growing older; she collected board games and old high school yearbooks so that when we were old and decrepit we could survive without electricity.

The road threaded between vast outcroppings of stone. How many thousands of men had chiseled the cleft we rode through, and with what primitive instruments? Not even the bombs that laid waste to the countryside could dent these massive walls.

Finally we arrived before a wide, jagged pedestal and in the center of the pedestal stretched a tall, vertical pole. Some kind of flagpole, without a flag. On either side of the pole sat a pair of bronze figures, erect and austere, with daunting wings protruding upward from their shoulders, like kitchen knives. It was implausible to think they could ever take flight with those scissored wings, but they were guaranteed to poke your eye out. Emanating from their loins were mammoth bronze genitals, all out of proportion to the geometry of their figures. They were obviously his and her organs, but due to their formation it would have been a dissatisfying union—his plumbing was twisted and angular, spiked like a stegosaurus, while hers was cavernous, in the shape of a cornucopia the interior studded with spiral blades and corkscrews. Scratched on the inside of one were the words *Genitals by Jake*.

"That has got to hurt," said Mike. "No wonder there are only two of them—they could never reproduce."

Jenny: Do you think their parts even *fit*?

In a way I had to admire the grotesque lengths someone had taken to disfigure these stern bookends. They couldn't fly; they couldn't breed; they couldn't even raise a brazen hand to cover their ponderous organs.

Leaving our bikes in the shadows of the statues, we walked down the road that topped Hoover Dam. On the ground we read the words *Liberate the Earth* spray-painted in broad, sweeping strokes. As we walked to the halfway point between the opposite banks, we saw the road drop out of sight. There was a vast gash from the top of the dam to the bottom, and a cataract of water streamed through.

We camped with our lunch on a ledge inside the gash, about twenty feet down from the surface of the road, safely out of sight. While we were bathed in sunlight, the vapors from the crashing waters billowed over us, tessellating the air with primary colors. Dawn was in a picture-taking mood so we posed while she

snapped her photographs. Then Char and I perched in our own private crevice and fed each other Amish leftovers.

"Do you think this is the apocalypse?" asked Dawn.

"I doubt it," I said. "You'd never know if you were in it. It's like a dream; you only know it was a dream after you've awakened."

"Did you ever notice all the movies are about the post-apocalypse?" Mark wondered. "It's like you only know when it's *after* the apocalypse, not when it's *during*."

"It's like saying, 'he was the best boyfriend I've ever had,'" said Jenny. "How do you know that until you're on your last one?"

"Can something be post-apocryphal?" I asked, emphasis on the last syllable.

"If this is the apocalypse, I need to find a stronger mate," said Jenny. "You're more of a gatherer," she motioned toward Mark. "I want a hunter type."

"You should look for someone who can distill petroleum from tree roots," Mark replied. "And gin and tonic from nail parings."

"Yuck!" said Dawn. I had to agree with her—what a dubious qualification.

"I'd rather find a dentist," Char contributed. "Can you imagine having a toothache during the apocalypse?"

"Who wants to climb?" asked Mark, peering down into the fissure.

"Yes, yes," I said.

Char agreed, although it was thumbs down by Dawn, James, and Jenny. Char and I packed up our lunch remains and followed Mark down into the gash. Where we had been lunching the gash was wide, with broad outcroppings, allowing us to step carefully downward. As we descended, the two edges narrowed, so we straddled the fissure with our arms and legs like an X. The wind rushed through the cleft as plumes of water crashed in all directions. One misstep and I could picture myself kiting away from the safety of the rocks on the strength of the fierce wind. It reminded me of the tumbler effect when you're surfing and a wave pummels you to the sand and then roll after roll of surf washes over you. You can sense how much horsepower is in each crashing wave and how you are less than a leaf in the wind to the force.

Mark leaned in to me so his words could carry over the crescendo. "Enough?"

"What?"

"Enough?"

It was like bar talk. "Enough! Enough!" we agreed. We began our slow ascent, leaving wind and spray behind.

The rest of the group was ready to leave, so we climbed to the top of the fissure and lifted our heads cautiously aboveground to get an eyeful of road. We

didn't want Earth Liberation to return to perform more acts of genital mutilation or dam work while we were milling about. Luckily the road was still empty, except for our motorbikes. We lugged our gear back to the bikes and strapped everything back in place. I looked at my watch—several hours till sunset.

"I think I left my watch back down in the crevice," I said.

"What?" asked Mark; then, "Do you think it fell off the edge?"

"I'd better go back and check," I replied. "It was a gift." I motioned with my head toward Char. First anniversary gift, in fact.

I could tell they were going to wait for me, so I said, "You guys head back. Char and I will catch up. I'll bet we find it where we were eating lunch."

"Are you sure? You don't want to get caught by an Earth Liberation lunatic."

"I'm sure—we'll be okay," I said.

"We'll be fine," Char added. I held her hand as we walked back to the fissure, so she could feel the watch was still on my wrist. When we reached the edge of the gash, we pretended to gaze intently downward as they rode off on the bikes. "You're bad," said Char.

"I just love traveling to exotic locations to find new places to be alone with you," I said.

Thank God, they don't have mirrors in public places. If Char could have seen herself, she would have mortified. Her face was reddened by the Nevada sun; her hair was matted and her clothes were torn and soiled. To me, she looked more than beautiful, unspoiled by cosmetics and an hour of preening. Would you rather look at the sunset or some artist's painting of a sunset?

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to be here with Jenny?" she asked.

"Positive."

"With Dawn?"

"Definitely positive."

"With Marta, Tami, Janet, Kalani, Corine, Paula, or Brie?"

"Did you say Marta?" I queried. Marta was one of Char's friends, and every time I visited, Marta always found some excuse to be changing in and out of her knickers.

"Yes," Char replied.

"HMMMMM," I said, pretending to think. "Definitely positive."

"How do you know you couldn't just substitute me with someone else?"

"That's the thing," I replied. "When you find someone who is so different from everyone else on the planet, whom you could never be happy without, then she's the one for you, isn't she?"

Then she asked, "Am I the one for you?"



“Definitely.”

“Why?”

She always continued to ply me with questions until I ran out of answers.

“Am I the one for you?” I countered.

“I don’t know. There’s always Marta...”

“I think I should be the only one for you,” I said, but she was off the topic now.

She yawned and laid her head on my shoulders. “Night night,” she said.

The sun was about to set when we awoke. The air was cooler and the sunlight muted. There was still no sign of the Earth Liberation.

“See, I told you this wasn’t the apocalypse,” said Char. “Do you think we could do *this* if it were the apocalypse?”

I suppose not.

## CHAPTER 2

---

# WHAT NOT TO SAY, AND WHEN NOT TO SAY IT

*Thoop.* It was the pneumatic tube. I disentangled my limbs from Char's and stretched across the bed to open the latch on the tube.

"Good morning," the handwritten note read. "Time to wake up. The front desk." It was a very clumsy system. If I wanted to snooze for a little longer, say ten more minutes, I had to write "Snooze—10 minutes" on the note and send it back through the pneumatic pipes. Instead, I folded the note (which I wanted as a souvenir), took a sheet of stationery from the table by the bed, and wrote, "Many thanks—room 714." I placed the note back in the tube, closed the latch and waited a few seconds for it travel through the tube and into the ether. Sometimes you could catch a mixture of scents through the tube—faux sausage frying in the kitchen, perfume wafting from one of the guest rooms, cigarette smoke.

I leaned over the edge of the bed and kissed Char softly, so as not to waken her.

"Where are you going?" she asked, groggily.

"Out for a swim."

"No—come back to bed!"

"I'll be back soon," I whispered.

I stepped carefully through the room, avoiding laundry middens and half-opened suitcases. I stepped into the bathroom, closed the door, and lit a can-

dle. When my eyes adjusted to the dim light I hunted among the toiletries for my toothbrush.

*Again?* I thought, looking at myself in the mirror. My face was marked with random scratches, some deep enough to have drawn blood. I looked at my nails for a cause. Every couple of days I'd get these scratches—I would even see blood streaked across my pillow some mornings. Blame it on the ocelots.

*After a half-mile of freestyle swimming, the scratches won't be such a stare magnet,* I thought. I did my ablutions, plucked my swimsuit from the curtain rod on the shower, high-stepped into each leg—hole, and stole out the bathroom. Oops—almost forgot the goggles.

Dare I disturb the pool surface? I stood at the edge of the pool, staring at its translucent lens; then did a swimmer's dive into the water.

While I swam, I focused on my stroke. I pretended to be able to watch myself with an omniscient camera, from ten feet above, ten feet beside me, at the water level, eyeing my stroke. At what angle did my hand enter the water? Was I kicking enough? It wasn't as if I had any skill at the sport, but there was nothing else to do with your brain than concentrate on your stroke. If I thought about anything else beside my stroke I'd end up swimming into the rope, or forgetting my lap count. Once I had even swam straight into the side of the pool! I needed a swimming reflex, like the breathing reflex.

Twenty-four laps. I saw a pair of legs churning the water in the lane beside me. This was Frida, my morning swim partner. I had never spoken to her nor even seen her above the water level. I had no idea, in fact, if her name was Frida but every morning we wordlessly goaded each other into longer swims. Every time I wanted to quit, I would see her kick off the edge of her lane and continue to swim. So I would do the same, and I'm sure whenever she felt like stopping, she would goggle my progress and press on.

Was blood trailing from the lacerations on my face? How on earth could sharks detect molecules of blood in the water? I wanted senses like that. Actually, I wanted to be able to read people's minds. Like Char's.

Was that forty-two laps or forty-four? Forty-two.

I didn't really want to be able to read her mind. What I really wished was to be her imprint, like a bird's mother. She was definitely my imprint. What would it be like to find your imprint and then lose her? You'd spend the rest of your life in search of her.

My arm came down like a paddlewheel on the lane line. See, I'd lost focus on my stroke and begun swimming off on a tangent. I could feel a rope rash irritat-

ing my arm. I looked aside and saw that Frida had finally abandoned her lane, so I knew it was time to get out.

I pulled off the goggles and began to dry myself with a towel from the towel cabinet. Then I walked back to the room. If I was lucky, Char would still be in bed and I could sidle up to her. I began towel-drying my hair so I wouldn't give her a chill and waken her. I opened the door to the room.

To my surprise, the lamp was lit. Char, not in bed, was sitting in a chair, in the fetal position. She was crying.

"Oh my God. What's wrong?" I said. I rushed to her side to hold her, but the moment I reached her, she pushed me away.

"Honey, what's going on? Are you okay?"

No response; she continued crying. She let her eyes wander obliquely, avoiding contact with mine.

"You have to tell me what's wrong," I repeated.

She reached for a tissue from the nightstand and wiped her eyes. "James and Dawn are gone," she replied.

That didn't sound that bad. "Gone where? Are they okay?"

"They came by this morning. They're leaving right away."

"Was everything all right?"

"No," she said. She inhaled with an exaggerated breath to get her sobs under control. "No. They had to leave Vegas right away. Dawn is pregnant." She whispered the last three words.

"Oh my God!" I said.

"They're leaving for Utah right away. They don't want to get caught."

"Why would they get caught? No one knows, right?"

"No—everyone knows because *you* blurted it out during breakfast yesterday."

"I did?" I did? Oh, yes I did, when they had first arrived for breakfast. Dawn had looked so pale and out of breath. "I was just saying it as a joke."

"That's the problem—you're always saying things like that as a joke. Sometimes you're just so thoughtless."

"Well, nobody heard me say it, I'm sure."

"Are you kidding? There are agents everywhere! The place was full of people who could have reported them."

Agents were everywhere, of course. Discovery meant compulsory abortion. I thought about the other guests in the dining hall yesterday morning. The man scribbling notes on his tablecloth; the arguing couple; the protein-eaters. Any one of them could be an agent. You could probably pay off a lot of gambling debts by

turning people in. What about the Amish? Were they agents of the government, too?

"Have they left already?"

"Yes—they stopped by just before leaving."

"Honey, come here. You know how sorry I am. I never meant to say anything to jeopardize them..."

Again, as I reached for her, she pushed me away.

"No, no, no," she said, emphatically. "This time you really said too much. You're always saying things that cause all this turmoil."

It was true. I had an uncanny ability for finding the one thing that was someone's secret or fear and managing to make a joke about it.

"Do you remember the old lady at the airport?" she asked.

"She got mad at me because I was *smiling!*" I explained, in lackluster self-defense. "I was just smiling, and she said, 'What right do you have to be happy?' You can't misconstrue that as my fault!"

"No one else made her mad..."

I knew it would be an utter waste of time defending myself. "What can we do for Dawn and James?" I asked. "Can we call them?"

"No. They're blocking us. Plus they don't want to talk to *you*."

I always knew I was in big trouble when Char spoke in italics.

"What about Mark and Jenny?"

"They know. They're leaving, too."

"What do you mean, *too*?"

"I'm leaving. I don't want to be around you right now."

"But I said I was sorry, and it was truly unintentional!"

She gave me a pained look, and I knew again there was no point in continuing. I would only make things worse (didn't I have the knack for that?).

"When are you leaving?" I asked, in resignation.

"Right away. I'm already packed."

And in fact, as I looked around the room I noticed her suitcase sitting door-side. I hit my fist against my forehead several times. Jerk jerk jerk jerk jerk.

*Thoop.* It was the pneumatic tube. Char arose preemptively and walked across the room to get it. She read the note, then folded it and put it in her pocket. "The monorail will be here in five minutes. I've got to go," she said.

"This is unbelievable," I muttered.

"Before you start pitying yourself, think about Dawn and James," she replied.

I was glad we hadn't stayed at Vive la Revolucion because I'm sure she would have signed me up for a beheading.

"Do you still love me?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

I was counting the nanoseconds between question and answer to see if she had to contemplate for a while; thank God the answer had been immediate.

"Like I said, I just don't want to be around you right now."

"I don't blame you," I said. "Will I see you in Tijuana?"

"Let's not talk about that right now."

"Okay, okay, okay," I agreed. "Can I have a kiss before you go?"

She walked over to me and leaned forward, kissing me briefly on the cheek. You know you've screwed up when...

"I love you," I said.

"I love you, too," she replied but then turned to the door. She picked up her suitcase, and was gone.

I walked to the door to follow her and then saw the note she had pinned to it—"Do not open this door to follow me." Faced with this literal admonition, I sat down.

Not even dry from the pool, I had already lost my girlfriend. I could pity myself, but what about Dawn and James? I could envision them, fleeing like a desperate Joseph and Mary on monorail, jet, or car. Why had I said what I'd said?

*Why had they decided to get pregnant? What kind of person does that? Never trust a couple when the guy is the less manly of the two,* I thought.

Wrong. That was patently unfair. What if Char and I decided some day that we wanted to have a baby? Would that ever happen? At the moment it seemed like monumental fiction. Besides, you can't disobey the Abortion Authority...

Bottom line—Dawn and James were my friends and they were in trouble. I picked up my phone and sat on the window ledge to recharge the battery using the air charger from the adjoining hotel. There was no in-room electricity, of course, courtesy of the Amish.

Once the phone charged, I put a tracer on Dawn and James. They were blocking me. I'm sure I was the last person they wanted to hear from; on the other hand, they were probably blocking everyone, and not just me. I checked our private discussion board, *alt.outdoors.bogs.alternativefuels.peat*, to see if they had left any messages, but there were none. I posted a note sufficiently cryptic, but which they would recognize as for them. *Vaya con Dios, mes amies*, I thought. When you're only talking to yourself it doesn't matter how many languages you mangle.

For kicks I tried to contact Char. Blocked, of course. I thought of running a tracer on her but decided against it. I thought I should post a note for her on the chance that she hadn't already disowned me—after all, this was a gambling town.

So I typed the following:

Dear Char:

Every day I find a dozen new ways to prove how much pain I can inflict with my mouth. I say ten thoughtful words, but a hundred thoughtless ones. You have to know that this isn't what is in my heart. I'm just a really bad comic who doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut.

There was no way I could send this. All this hyperbole would just remind her how big-mouthed I really was. Was I that bad, or was she just over-reacting? Yes, I was that bad. Like, I made that remark last week about food and that woman started crying.

Why not just tell her how I feel about her? Be descriptive rather than persuasive. So after some thought, I wrote something about her on a sheet of stationery; and after much crossing out and rearranging words, I typed it onto the phone:

Let's hear it for falling in love. Let's hear it for the moment I first saw you, when my eyes were a camera focused solely on you. You had been talking to your friends, but they fell outside my lens; their words were background noise. The moment was precarious, like seeing a deer through the branches of a tree or the iridescence on a bubble; one false move and the deer would vanish into the forest or the fragile glass ball would vaporize. That was how I felt the first moment I saw you.

Why didn't you take to the woods when you first saw me? My herd of friends was walking past yours, and to catch your eye I shouted out the usual attention-getting bravado. Your friends were instantly dismissive: "Yeah, whatever you say, jockstrap. You don't deserve her time." Yet as our groups coalesced and parted, you and I were left standing face-to-face in the middle of the campus quad, textbooks in your hands and a volleyball in mine.

What to say next? How do you coax a reluctant deer? How do you avoid the words or tone of voice that sends it speeding through the forest? I was never good at gentle speech. Despite my stammers and panicked jokes, you stayed; while we spoke, you traced characters on the ground with your foot. Writing what? Then I took the books from your hands and we moved to a bench at the end of the quad, beneath a tree. We spoke nonstop about college classes, old boy/girlfriends, parents, and plans.

How do you know when you've eaten the best meal you'll ever have? How do you know when you've seen the best sunrise you'll ever see in your life?

How do you know when you've read your favorite book, or seen the best play? You don't, of course, because tomorrow's sunrise may be more colorful, or the next book you read may surpass what you've read before. But from the first moment I saw you, I knew without a doubt that I would never find a more perfect match. And then what do you do?

What are you doing right now? Whatever it is, I hope it's punctuated with occasional moments when you stare interstitially, between the steering wheel and the road, or between the fork and the plate, when I hope you are looking for me.

Then I posted it on *alt.outdoors.bogs.alternativefuels.peat*. I also cross-posted it on several other forums, hoping that somehow it would travel through the Internet and find her.

There was no use staying in Vegas by myself. I dialed Mark and Jenny to see if they were still around. Then I made arrangements to meet Mark down by the Strip.

I dressed and packed quickly. I always traveled light so it was fairly easy to gather up my things and toss them into my backpack. I thumbed eight thousand dollars out of my wallet and set the bills on the bed for a tip. The Amish was on a cash-only basis. With my backpack over my shoulder, I walked down to the lobby.

The clerk at the front desk stared at me oddly. At this point, though, there wasn't much I could do to look normal to the Amish. "Hello," I said. "I'm checking out." I showed her my room key.

"Room 714?" she asked.

"Yup."

"Did you enjoy your visit?"

"It was very nice," I said, amiably.

She pulled a ledger out of a file cabinet and began doing math; then she showed me my charges. "Your total is eighty-five thousand, four hundred dollars," she said. I opened my wallet and counted out ninety thousand dollars. She took the money, and carefully counted back my change.

There was a stack of postcards on the counter, to my right. I looked through the postcards and found a picture of the Amish taken from the center of the Strip. I used a pencil and wrote "Vegas sucked!" on the back of the postcard. On top of everyone else who was angry at me, I would also piss off the Nevada Gaming Commission. I impressed my thumbprint on the corner for postage.



The bill paid, I walked out to the casino to wait for Mark. The slot machines were a spectacle. I'm sure more people chose to play here to watch the machines work rather than win any money from them. They were complex Babbage engines; pistons and rotating cylinders propelled steel balls through a labyrinth of chutes and tubes. When you twisted a lever, the gears began to whirl and the balls were set in motion. While the balls tumbled through the machine, the pins and tumblers subtly influenced the direction and velocity of each ball so that when they came to rest they would reward the player according to the regulated payout rate. It was rumored there was a huge Babbage engine six stories beneath the Amish; and when there were blackouts, the only sound to be heard on the Strip was the susurrus of meshing gears.

"Hey, Bryan."

It was Mark. "Hey," I replied. We did the male half-handshake/half-hug thing.

"What's wrong with your face?" he asked.

"What?" So that was why the hotel clerk was giving me the fish-eye. "Oh. Nothing, really. Every once in a while I scratch myself in my sleep."

"You should try wearing a football helmet to bed," he said. "Let's go outside."

We walked outside the hotel premises, onto the Strip.

"How's Jenny doing?" I asked.

"She's okay."

"Are you staying here, or going back to Tijuana?"

"We're staying for one more day, we've decided. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

"Oh. Char's already left. I'm going back home, too. Do you think if I leave it will draw attention?"

"I doubt it. The Amish doesn't record any transactions electronically so it's harder to trace you. I'm sure if you leave it's not going to trigger a manhunt."

"How do you think James and Dawn are doing?"

"You know they're fine. I'll bet they've already made it to the Mormon Underground."

"I hope so," I said.

"Don't worry," Mark continued. "Char isn't mad at you. I think she's mad at James and Dawn for having to leave."

"Like displacement?"

"Whatever. Once she knows that James and Dawn are okay, she won't be angry anymore."

“Why do you think they want to have a baby?” I asked. “Have you ever talked about it with Jenny?”

“No. It’s hard enough avoiding arrest for normal things like reading a book or grammatical infractions.”

“Pretty soon they’ll outlaw bedwetting.”

“Then there will be no pleasures left,” he added.

\* \* \* \*

I didn’t want to attract any more attention, especially with the marks on my face, so I debated what kind of mask would suit me best. My first thought was to dress as a humble Amish farmer but thought I would seem incongruous riding public transportation. I also thought about wearing a surgical mask, as if I were avoiding contagion, but settled for the Jackie Onassis look instead—dark sunglasses and over-the-head scarf. First the monorail to the airport, then I found a pilot who was planning to fly to Tijuana in the hour, as long as he could find five others. I worked out in the gym while he solicited the remaining passengers.

To help us pass the time, the pilot pitched trivia questions to the passengers about old television shows. Flying was very competitive and he was working on repeat business. It was actually pretty fun, and made us all feel chummy. As long as we didn’t burst into song, I was okay. When we got to the airstrip in Tijuana, I flagged a rickshaw-wallah, who gave me a ten-minute ride to my building. I thumbed two five hundred dollar bills out of my wallet to pay him and then thumbed myself into my flat.

My flat was a big slap in the face to a boy without a girl. Wall to wall there were pictures of her—from our trip to the Grand Canyon, an autocamera of us in San Diego (before the quake, of course). In my favorite picture she was by herself, wearing sunglasses, a necklace, a long-sleeve blouse, and a black skirt. She had clenched the sleeves between her the fingers and palm of each hand as if she were trying to stretch them. When I had taken the picture, I was asking her, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” and she was replying, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” and getting very impatient with me for not snapping the picture. Across the picture she had later penned, “Tan-less and makeup-less, the girl smiles for the camera...”

I just don’t believe that she can cut me off...She has to feel the same way I do—completely cut off from the only thing you’ve ever connected with. I phoned her again, and while the dial tone played I set my backpack down on the floor. I hadn’t even closed the front door before calling her; boy, was I eager. She

was still blocking me, but worse—I got an auto-reply message from her phone that told me not to call.

Close the door. I turned off the pictures on the wall so I wouldn't torture myself by seeing them; then I set the phone down on the table beside my backpack. I needed a shower and a meal; I had not even eaten breakfast yet. I dropped my clothes into a pile and stepped into the shower. While I ran the water I fast-forwarded a few weeks in my mind, when Dawn and James would be safe little breeders in Utah, and Char would not be angry with me anymore. Would she be forgiving once Dawn and James were safe? Why did I always say stupid things? I could be blamed for the deliberate ones, but to be blamed for the incidental ones, too, was pretty unfair.

*Enough of this self-pity, I thought. As much as the world sucks these days, you should be thankful your only problem is a girl who won't talk to you.* On the other hand, considering how much the world sucked these days, I really wanted to have a girl to talk to.

When I was younger, I had an infallible way of getting over a girl—I dated someone who looked just like her. It was an unbelievably simple remedy. There was Paula, for example, and when we broke up I began dating Carolyn, who looked just like Paula, only not as pretty and hence, not as difficult to please. I also tried a diametric approach. I would date a girl who looked the opposite of the girl I was trying to get over. For example, let's say I had been dating a curvy girl with long brown hair. To counteract her, I would date a rail-thin blonde. After I broke up with Carolyn I dated Gwyn. How would Darwin account for that kind of behavior? Nonetheless I knew there was no substitute for Char. The idea made me panic.—What if I did something stupid that made her not want to see me again—ever again? What if I did something totally irreparable? What if I had *already done* something irreparable? How do you get to be a century-old couple so inexorably fused that they die within weeks of each other? I only knew how to be a couple where the guy was on the verge of doing something stupid.

The shower was a big echo chamber; all I could hear was my own whiny voice. I had to get out and do something else. How much relationship-think could one guy stand?

After the shower I used the hot-air vent to dry off. Then I put on a clean pair of jeans and a shirt and laced on a pair of trainers. I could go to the dog races or maybe down to the beach to play volleyball. Maybe, since I was still on holiday, I could fly down to Baja for a day. I checked the mirror to see how the lacerations were doing. I didn't look too ghastly, not like Richard III. Maybe with a marking pen I could Frankenstein my face and really merit a stare.

A smudge appeared in the mirror; then I felt cloth close over my mouth. I made eye contact in the mirror with a face in a black hood, and then I felt a pain in my neck th—

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The lift; I could tell from its tremulous descent. I was propped in the corner of the lift; the walls seemed out-of-focus and dimensionless. There was a person standing on either side of me, like chess pieces. A kidnapping in Mexico? That was usually the purview of the moneyed class. Boy, were these guys going to be pissed when they learned they'd kidnapped someone from the wrong economic caste. I couldn't please anyone today.

Mark had been kidnapped three times. His family had beaucoup money so he was unscathed at the end of each transaction; except for three new tattoos his captors had given him. Speaking of tattoos, the chess piece in front of me was brightly festooned with them, like a human comic strip. Would I have to get a tattoo? It would ruin my tan. Anyway, it was a moot point, because I was certain they would kill me once they realized I wasn't legal tender. My only job was to make sure I didn't ruin my britches.

The lift came to a halt; then the doors slid apart. The chess pieces lifted me out of my corner and sidled me out into the street. There stood an out-of-focus version of my rickshaw-wallah. Didn't I give you enough of a tip? I tried to mouth, but I was somnambulant, unable to speak or stir. The chess pieces set me in the rickshaw and buckled me into the seat. Then my treacherous rickshaw-wallah handed them something and shook their hands, as routinely as if he were buying an umbrella or cello from them. They headed down the sidewalk. The wallah mounted the seat at front the rickshaw and began to pedal. As he steered us into traffic I felt like one of those ornamental god-children in India who are toted through muddy villages. I couldn't lift a hand to wipe the drool I felt on my chin, nor right myself when the rickshaw careened sideways. Five minutes ago I was worried about whether someone would gawk at a scratch on my face and now I bobbed in traffic like a waiter with a trayful of drinks. When was the last time my day was normal? I wondered. I really must have pissed off the gods today.

We were heading to the north side of town. After a while the traffic thinned; there were fewer rickshaws and motorcycles, and only an occasional truck passed, mostly long-haulers. The rickshaw-wallah was still pedaling furiously, but every time he was able to coast he would look at his watch. *Ahhh*, I thought—*we must*

*be on a timetable. Or maybe he is paid piece-work, rather than by the hour.* I could feel some motor skills returning to my fingers, but my legs still felt numb. Finally he pulled over to meet a cab that was parked alongside the road; then he slowed the rickshaw and we stopped. He dismounted and leaned back to where I was seated, and he unbuckled my straps. Someone opened the rear door of the cab; the rickshaw-wallah raised my arm over his neck and maneuvered me into the open door.

"Don't expect a tip this time," I mumbled, but it sounded more like "Doe spek tis tie," by which the wallah was unmoved.

He closed the door, and the driver started the cab and drove off, leaving the rickshaw-wallah behind us. The cab reeked of cigarette butts and stale beer. It smelled like my first two years of college. There was a faint whiff of gasoline, so the car was probably a petrol-hydrogen conversion, which meant it was older than I. The upholstery was torn and bleached from too much UV exposure. I wanted to roll down the window for some fresh air but figured that wouldn't be captor etiquette.

We drove for a while as I practiced working my jaws, restoring circulation. I cleared my throat a few times and swallowed so I could work up a speech. There were the backs of two heads in front of me, driver and passenger, and I mulled over which figure to address. But the passenger turned around to face me, moot-ing my indecision.

"Praise the Lord," he said jocundly.

That definitely de-gassed all the remarks I was readying. "Praise the Lord," I replied, too startled to say anything else.

"Shall we pray?" he continued. In an aside to the driver, he added, "Brother Patrick, you can keep your eyes on the road." Then, to the ambient deities, he said, "Dear God, our God, we thank thee for thy many blessings. We ask you to watch over us as we complete thy mission, for we know we are in the camp of the Army of Darkness. Amen."

"Amen," chimed Brother Patrick.

"What is your mission?" I interjected, borrowing his term.

"You."

"Are you sure you've got the right person? I really don't have the kind of money you're looking for."

He held up an enlarged copy of my ID card, replete with my name and picture. "C'est moi," I concluded. "So why did you want me?"

"We were told to grab you," volunteered the driver.

“‘The Master hath need of thee’, Gospel of Luke, chapter nineteen verse thirty-one,” his counterpart added.

“Can I open my window?” I asked, apropos of me not wanting to inhale stale cigarette smoke any longer. “I want some fresh air.”

“One sec,” the other brother replied. He pressed a switch on the console and my window slid open.

“What’s wrong with your face? Did we bang you up like that?”

I studied myself in the rear-view mirror. It was just my laceration. “No, I came like this,” I explained. “So who are you?”

“We are soldiers in God’s Army,” Brother Patrick replied.

I felt another Bible verse coming on. “The Army of God is...” I prompted, elliptically.

“The Aryan Nation and Church of the Creator, Western States.”

“Hmmm...” I mused. Maybe they were going to whack me for being an unbeliever. “I thought the Aryan Nation was a bunch of racist, gun-toting, Bible-thumping militia men.”

“We are,” the other brother replied. He demonstrated by showing me the tip of his M-16. “I am Brother Dallas,” he added, offering me his meaty hand to shake. “Ya see, we’re traveling ‘incognito’” [here he made quote puppets with his fingers in the air] through the Armies of Darkness. Low profile. Here in San Diego you got the El Norté. Along the coast you got Sodom and Gomer. They don’t like it when we invade their turf, so we try to be, like I said, ‘incognito.’” [More quote puppets.]

“As the Lord sent the sons of Israel to spy on the land of the Canaanites,” Brother Patrick elaborated. He seemed to thrive on scriptural imprimatur.

“So where are we headed?” I asked.

“First, we drive over the grapevine; then we get to Bakersfield,” Brother Dallas replied. “Then we drive up highway five to Fresno.”

“I don’t suppose I could make a phone call...” I tested.

“Nope. No phone calls. Don’t worry, though; the drive won’t take too long.”

It was becoming fairly obvious that this was not an everyday Tijuana abduction. For one thing, those kidnappings usually involved street gangs or organized crime, not a pair of jocular Bible-thumpers. For another, they never took you out of town; instead, you were holed up in someone’s flat until your family transferred money into your abductor’s account. It was all fairly perfunctory.

Why was I abducted, then? Did it have anything to do with Dawn and James’s disappearance? Once again, I thought not. The Abortion Authority was heavy-handed; they would come to your door en masse, in full fascist regalia, and

break it down before you had a chance to flee. There would be a fanfare of charges, announced in stentorian tones; then they would drag you out of your flat, shackled, to serve as a lesson to the general populace.

I thought for an instant about Dawn and James, and again wished them safe passage to Utah. *It's a shame I'm agnostic*, I thought. There are times when you have nothing to offer, not even a prayer.

What was it, then? Why would I attract someone's attention? It had to be our work. Mark and I had been working on new cryptography software. We continually intercepted transmissions from all over the world to see if we could crack them, to test our deciphering algorithms. We spied on traffic from the U.S. government, the European Union, the Vatican, but especially from corporate channels. It was mostly the corporations that had the computing power for high-end encryption. Perhaps the Bible-thumpers wanted me to decrypt some message they had received, or intercepted.

There was nothing to read in the back of the cab. *Never travel without reading material*, I told myself. I knew better than to ask Brother Dallas if he had anything I could read because on the dashboard of the cab sat a well-worn Bible. What the heck. "Brother Dallas, do you have anything I could read?"

He handed me the Bible.

"Read it out loud," exclaimed Brother Patrick. "I can't read while I'm driving."

I opened the book to the pages where a ribbon had been pressed and began to read as the cab rumbled northward.

## CHAPTER 3

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# NEVER BE TOO FAR FROM A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

A checkpoint. Two guards in camouflage uniforms poked their heads inside the windows of the cab, and then exchanged low murmurs with Brothers Patrick and Dallas. It was near dusk. My neck felt out-of-joint, and I was hungry and heavy with bladder. I felt like the weak member of the herd, ripe for predation. The guards waved us through with the tips of their rifles.

Is this Fresno?

*I'd hate to be a rabbit in this town*, I thought. M-16s seemed to be the shoulder-garment of choice. In the background I heard the metronome of soldiers—boots striking pavement, officers barking orders. As the cab drove slowly down the street, soldiers in pairs took seats on the hood of the cab, chatted amiably with my handlers, and then jumped off when we reached some bunker or intersection.

Soon we arrived at what seemed, by virtue of its longitudinal skyline, to be downtown Fresno. Brother Patrick steered the cab curbside, put the car in park, and ceremoniously shut off the engine.

“End of the line,” said Brother Dallas.

The rear door opened; I got out of the cab and into the waiting arms of soldiers who stood on each side of me, again like chess pieces. We walked down a sidewalk, past the statue of a horse. On the statue was a plaque that read some-



thing about a Turkish massacre of Armenians. I hope they don't blame me for it. I didn't say goodbye to my amiable Bible-thumpers, I thought too late, yet another lapse of captor etiquette.

More soldiers guarded the entrance of what looked like an office building; they opened the doors and let us pass unchallenged.

Through another door and into an empty room. One of the soldiers dropped a duffel bag on the floor. "Get changed," he explained. Then he and the other soldier left. Was this a tipping situation?

I investigated the contents of the duffel bag. It held a pair of boots, a neatly folded army uniform, a towel, soap and other toiletries, and a pocket-size Bible. Was I being inducted? Maybe I was being pressed into service like the British Royal Navy circa 1762. I wouldn't mind being a soldier in God's army, but I didn't want to have to act so doctrinaire. With soap and towel in hand, I knew there had to be a bathroom in the vicinity. So I tested the only other door in the room—and lo and behold, a WC. After I performed my ablutions and took a shower I felt much better, more able to fend off predators. I put on the uniform and laced up the boots. Where's my M-16? I banged on the door to catch the guards' attention.

"Ready to go," I said through the closed door.

The guards led me down the hall until we stopped before a pair of double doors. One of the guards knocked; we waited. A woman opened the door, wearing street clothes; she was the first civilian I'd seen thus far.

"Thank you," she said to the guards. Then she took me by the hand and we walked into the room.

"Welcome, Bryan," said a voice at the far end of the room. "I've been waiting quite a while for you."

The room was unlit; dusk added no light. I had to strain my eyes to see who was speaking.

"Have a seat." The woman pulled my hand to guide me to a chair.

"Do I have an overdue library book?" I asked. Might as well get shot right away and avoid the wait.

"Can you turn on the lights please, Sister Ashley?" said the voice.

Click—lights.

"Are you the head Klansman?" I asked as he came into focus. I followed it with a don't-shoot-me-I'm-joking grin.

"I am Colonel Bouchet, military head of the Aryan Nation/Church of the Creator, Western States. I am the reason you're here."

“Brilliant,” I replied. “So why on earth did you drag me all the way from Tijuana?”

“To study you,” he said, “or perhaps to let you study me.”

“To *study*?” I asked, incredulously, italics added. “With all the spies and surveillance and informants on the market, why did you have to bring me *here* to *study* me?”

“Because I wanted to keep you close,” he replied.

“Me in particular?”

“You, of course.”

“Okay then, why me?”

“I cannot tell you,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked, a touch exasperated.

“It has to do with game theory,” the colonel explained. “If I tell you, and you’re not the person I’m looking for, then I’ll have shown my cards. There are also spies here in Fresno, you know. Instead, I’ll just study you and let you reveal yourself.”

“Is this like the adage about keeping your friends close, and your enemies closer?”

“Perhaps.”

I was trying to figure out what this conversation had to do with secret messages and cryptography. I couldn’t ask him if he wanted me to crack some transmission for him, because that would be divulging too much about me. For the same reason, he probably couldn’t identify what he wanted from me. This game theory sounded quaint, but I doubted it would get me back home very soon. Home to Char.

“Haven’t you already shown your cards by kidnapping me?” I suggested. “If I’m the one you’re looking for, what’s to stop me from harming you now that you’ve blown your cover?”

“You’re right—I have exposed myself somewhat...but it was worth the exposure to get you into my embrace. Besides, you may be the one I was hunting for, but I may not be the person you’re hunting for. So if you harmed me, you’d only be showing your cards.”

Why had he used the word *hunt*? “This is too twisted for me,” I concluded. “Have you ever read the book *Giles Goat Boy*?”

“No. Here we stick to the Bible.”

“I’m sure our guest must be famished,” Sister Ashley interrupted. “Colonel, do you think we can talk to the guards?”

"Certainly. Be right back," he replied. He crossed the room and stepped outside.

I figured it must have been a prearranged signal—I couldn't imagine the colonel placing orders from the kitchen.

"So do you plan on converting me?" I asked Sister Ashley.

"No, I'm positive it would be a waste of time," she replied. "Besides, you have a diametrically wrong opinion of us."

"That you're white supremacists?"

"Precisely. You see we are really *separatists*, not supremacists. Back when there was a social structure and whites had a monopoly on the resources, separatism really meant suppression. Now, however, there is no social structure, there are no resources, and no one has a monopoly. Separatism equates with purity. Here we don't have reprobates, defilers, and the children of Gomorrah in our community; instead we have the fellowship of Christians—there is no disharmony here."

"No, what you have here is a police state," I objected. "I'm sure not all of your guns are trained on your enemies."

She shrugged her shoulders with equanimity, as if to say, you have your opinions and I have mine. Not much of a religious zealot. "We were driven here," she explained, "by your government. The churches were persecuted by the Federal Bureau of Worship, so we fled to the inland areas, which the government had already abandoned. We joined with the paramilitary religious groups, like the Aryan Nation, frankly, because they had guns. We needed protection."

"So who are you?" I asked.

"I have no military role here," she explained. "I'm here to attend to the religious side of things."

"Like if someone sneezes, you say, 'God bless you'?"

"Yes, if you'd like to trivialize my calling."

"What's the plan for me? Do I get to join a battalion or a platoon or something?"

"Of course not. We don't want you carrying a weapon."

"Can I use a phone?"

"No."

"Can I go wherever I want?"

"Yes, so long as you do not leave the city."

"You do understand the enigmatic position I'm in," I said. "If I reveal myself to be the one your colonel is hunting for, I'm sure he'll kill me. If I have nothing to reveal, he'll decide I'm not the one he is hunting for, and then he'll kill me."

And I have no idea what telltale signs he is relying on to make the determination.”

“If you feel your situation is precarious, I can recommend a good book where all life’s questions are answered...” she countered.

“That’s better,” I said. “I was beginning to think you weren’t a fanatic.”

A knock on the door. “Come in,” Sister Ashley instructed. Without looking away from me, she added, “Brother Thomas and Sister Julia will escort you to the mess hall for a good Christian meal, and then to the barracks for the night.”

As she concluded, the doors opened and two guards entered the room. I looked toward them as they entered, and Oh my God! the most stunning woman in uniform and boots walked into the room. She had long, straight black hair and black eyebrows but a luminous face. Beside her stood another guard with identical chiaroscuro features, like fraternal twins.

“Do we see eye to eye on what is expected of you?” Sister Ashley asked.

“No phones, no leaving the premises, no repeating the Lord’s prayer backward,” I replied.

“Excellent. We shall meet again tomorrow.”

We walked out of the room swiftly, then through the office doors and outside. Despite the fact the sun had set it was warm outside, not a breeze to tickle a follicle. My isomorphic guards walked in front of me, heads bowed together in animated tête-à-tête. The orbit around me had widened, I noticed. I was no longer shoulder-to-shoulder with my watchers. In retrospect, there had been no reason for them to have caged me earlier—they had all the guns and I had no place to run. Perhaps the relaxed guard was just some psychological tactic to lower my defenses.

Why was she so engrossed in talking with him? If I were going to be trapped in this theocracy for a while, I wanted to have an eye magnet. I had the same philosophy that Steinbeck expressed in *Tortilla Flats*—never go to bed with an unfinished bottle of wine in the house. Never be too far from a beautiful woman. But there was no distracting her from her dialog with the isomorph; when I tried to catch her eye or ask her a question, she simply moved closer to him.

I could tell we had reached the mess hall by the diffusion of cooking odors in the atmosphere and the sound of banging plates and trays. Guards snapped to as we entered the mess hall through a pair of open doors. My escort gestured me through with his hand. What was his name? Brother Something. Brother Thomas. We joined the tail end of the food line. I hadn’t eaten all day, I remembered. My last meal, in fact, had been Amish cuisine. It was when we had all convened for dinner following our Hoover Dam excursion. The only thing on everyone’s

minds while we ate had been where to shop or to gamble. Or so I had thought. Actually, James and Dawn were already plotting their escape to Salt Lake City so Dawn could ripen her child. The seeds of my own disintegration were already germinating. *Après nous le déluge...*

How were Dawn and James? Had they reached safety yet? How long does it take to get from Nevada to Utah? By cab? By rickshaw-wallah?

Here it was, fewer than twelve hours without Char and I was already lusting over the first long-haired paramilitary my eyes fell on.

She was ahead of me in the food line, handing her tray to an aproned food server who exclaimed, "Praise the Lord, Sister Julia." Sister Julia...why was she wearing gloves? Perhaps she was fervently antiseptic.

At each station I was greeted with food and a benediction:

- Mashed potatoes ["Praise the Lord!"]
- Sweet corn ["God bless!"]
- Sliced turkey breast ["Hallelujah! Rejoice in the Lord!"]
- Bread rolls ["Praise the Lord!"—again!]

I filled my own glass of milk and had no encomium to offer.

We carried our trays to a table where several other soldiers were holding forth in a lively conversation. As I sat, someone reached out to shake my hand and said, "Praise the Lord. I'm Brother Garrett."

"I'm [!] Bryan," I replied. I couldn't use the "brother" honorific, so to match the cadence of their speech I elicited an epiglottal stop.

"How do you like Brother Thomas and Sister Julia?" he asked.

"They're very nice," I replied perfunctorily, between forksful of corn. I noticed their heads were bowed in premeal prayer, yet another dissimilitude between them and me.

"They never talk to anyone but each other," Brother Garrett continued. "You know they're brother and sister?"

"Sure," I responded. Everyone here was a brother or a sister.

"No—they're really brother and sister. He's her brother and she's his sister."

"Aaaahh," I said in polysyllable. That explained why they were inseparable. It meant she was still on the market.

"Do you know how they got here?" Brother Garrett persisted. "Brother Thomas, tell us how you got here."

Brother Thomas looked up from his tray but produced only a blank expression.

Brother Garrett was nonplused. "Brother Thomas and Sister Julia were child prodigies," he said, "child prodigies for the Lord." He nodded in their direction, looking for ratification but received none. "They were preaching the word of God when they were five years old, living on the streets of Oakland without a home or a family," he continued.

"Their ministry was to the prostitutes and drug users and reprobates, and they were bringing so many souls to Jesus that pretty soon the pimps and the drug dealers could no longer do their immoral traffic. So the pimps and the drug dealers decided to set up Brother Thomas and Sister Julia, you know, to get rid of them. Excuse me..." Brother Garrett inserted a meat-laden fork into his mouth, paused to chew laboriously and swallow, and then continued, "At the time, our Lord's servants were living in a railcar near Jack London Square so they could preach to the sinners who came from the bus terminal. The pimps and drug dealers bought a pair of nasty pit bulls that they beat and starved and trained to be vicious. One night after a Come to Jesus meeting, young Brother Thomas and Sister Julia went back to their railcar for the night, and a gang of defilers unloaded the dogs into the railcar and locked the doors. Then they banged on the outside of the railcar with sticks and clubs to make the dogs crazy with fear, and the railcar rattled like a drum. So the sun would not rise on their iniquity, they hitched the railcar to a train that was heading south that night.

"It so happened that Colonel Bouchet (who was only Brother Bouchet at the time) was holding an Aryan Nation march in Fresno, and as the marchers were parading down the street, they heard barking from one of the trains parked in the rail yard. They pried open the doors of the railcar, and lo and behold there sat young Brother Thomas and Sister Julia, unharmed, with the dogs at their feet, peaceful as lambs."

"So why had the dogs been barking?" I asked, fearing there had been some kind of carnage, despite his claim of canine lassitude.

"Because the little preachers wanted to get out! They got the dogs to bark to catch someone's attention," Brother Garrett replied. "But it wasn't a Daniel in the Lions' Den miracle completely, for Brother Thomas and Sister Julia gave up preaching to the sinners and haven't spoken much to anyone else besides each other since that time."

I looked at the isomorphs with renewed respect. Brother Thomas was engrossed in his plate but Sister Julia stole a glance at me from the corner of her eye, her beautiful face curtained by her hair. She was still wearing her gloves! *How sanitary is this place?* I wondered.

"Tell us how you got here, Brother Garrett," one of the soldiers at the table beckoned. "Nah," he demurred. "You don't want to hear that story again."

"Brother Bryan hasn't heard it yet!"

I had been promoted to brother, I noticed. Of course, they must have known nothing about my origins.

"I shall not glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," Brother Garrett persevered, bona fiding his demurrer with scripture. I noticed everyone had an amusing vocal pattern—when they spoke extemporaneously they were idiomatic, but when they lapsed into Bible-speak they had eloquence and pentameter.

"Go ahead, Brother—you're not bragging. It'll be a testimonial."

"All right," Brother Garrett acquiesced, although I could tell he wasn't reticent to begin with.

"I grew up in a small town in Arizona," he began. "My parents were really poor so we lived on the poor side of town. I joined a gang when I was in middle school. We were always having gang fights and gun battles, stealing cars and breaking into houses. I spent a lot of time in the Arizona Youth Authority. That's where I got these"—he showed us the tattoos on his arms, a spider web and a hangman's noose—"and these,"—tattoos on his knuckles, spelling *d-i-e* and *h-a-t-e*—"and this,"—he took off his cap and there was a swastika emblazoned on his scalp. "The devil filled my heart with hate. In the Youth Authority, you know, you had to join a gang to keep alive."

"When I got out, I moved into a halfway house called the East-End Rehabilitation Center. We waged war against the West-End Rehabilitation Center, a halfway house at the other end of town. Every day we would hassle the prostitutes and drug users for money, rob liquor stores and pawn shops, then go on a shooting rampage against the WERC. If we killed ten of them, they killed ten of us, and twenty more were released from the Youth Authority, so it was like an unstoppable spigot."

"Praise the Lord!" chimed in one of our fellow diners, a little off in his timing.

"Then one day the Youth Authority opened a new halfway house on the north side of town called the Northwest Rehabilitation Center, and we know it was only a matter of time before the WERC joined with NWRC against us. So we arranged to have a shootout with them at an abandoned factory. We met at the factory, one hundred on our side and one hundred on theirs. I had the sin of pride in my heart and wanted to die in glory, so as we faced each other, I lunged into the middle of the building to bait the other side. I heard a gunshot and felt a bullet graze my head." Here he lifted his cap again to exhibit an elongated lesion above his ear. "The bullet knocked me out. When I awoke a while later, I looked

around me, and the floor was covered with tangled bodies, wall to wall. Then I knew the hand of God had slain every person in that building! For some reason, my life was spared. It was a miracle!

"I tossed my gun onto the pile of bodies and stumbled out of the factory, with no clue as to what to do next. Then I felt a hand on my shoulders. I was unarmed so I couldn't shoot, and I praise the Lord for that because it was Colonel Bouchet, who was walking door to door preaching the word of God." A chorus of "amen" erupted around the table. "I fell on my knees, right there in the street, and prayed for my salvation. Then I joined Colonel Bouchet."

Hallelujahs all around and back-slapping followed.

"Okay, Sister Anita," Brother Garrett prompted, raising his glass to his lips. "Tell us how the Lord brought you here."

Sister Anita looked down at the floor, then up at the ceiling, swallowed, and exhaled a lungful of air with deliberation, before she began. "I went to medical school because I'd always wanted to become an obstetrician. I *love* children. While I was in my residency, the government instituted the Zero Child Policy. Suddenly there was no need for birthing centers and obstetricians, but there was a shortage of abortionists." She hesitated and took a long draft of air, clenching her hands so tightly her fingernails must have gouged her skin. "I worked in the clinic performing about eight or nine abortions a day. They were all voluntary, but it seemed such a denial of my calling that I loathed myself more and more as each day passed. I starved myself; I cut myself, gashing my skin to make up for each life I took. At night I went to clubs and had sex with any man I saw, hoping to catch a venereal disease. I could never inflict enough harm to myself to assuage the horror of the abortion clinic. Then one day, after I had taken a pair of twins from a woman's body, I retreated into a vacant room so I could gouge double incisions into my right hip, the only part of my body that was more flesh than wound. But the room was not vacant. Strapped to a bed was a woman who was sobbing so deeply, the bed shook.

"Don't take my baby!" she cried when she saw me. "Please, I beg you, don't take my baby!"

I was so shocked I ran out of the room. You see, we had been told the abortions were *voluntary*. Not compulsory. But it turned out the women I operated on were sedated to be docile.

"I went to the chief abortionist's office and accosted him. 'Why was this woman forced to have an abortion?' I asked. 'Nonsense,' he replied. He led me to the operating room where I was scheduled to operate next, and there lay the same woman, only now she was placid and cooperative.



"Then it dawned on me. She wasn't a patient; she was a *mother*, and I was an instrument of the government and the Zero Child Policy. I was almost catatonic. I couldn't guide my limbs. The chief abortionist took my hands in his and together we cut the child from its mother. Still in shock I gathered the jumble of organs in my hands and ran out of the clinic, my feet thundering down the street as I looked for shelter. Then I came to a church and pushed the doors apart with my elbows. There was Colonel Bouchet in a prayer circle with other brothers and sisters. They looked at me in disbelief, and then a miracle happened. The ganglion of organs in my hands began to cry, and as I looked down I noticed the tissues I held were an intact child, gulping for air. That day, Colonel Bouchet found the baby's mother and helped her flee with her child to the Mormon Underground. I have been a devotee ever since."

"Brother Bryan, tell us how you came here," Brother Garrett pleaded.

I thought back on my circumstances. I had been plucked from a bourgeois, oblivious life where I had no controversies or horrors to overcome, and dropped in the heart of a Shakespearian tragedy like Fortinbras. I realized I could ask nothing of these people, and that I had nothing to give them.

"Well," I began, with deliberate understatement, "I came home from a vacation in Las Vegas, was kidnapped, and then driven here by cab."

"Brother Bryan, you crack us up," Brother Garrett concluded with a cheery guffaw.

After our meal, the brothers and sisters went to chapel while I sat outside staring at the beams of light emanating from the multicolored windows panes of the chapel, listening to the sonorous voices. They had a sincerity that I, as an unbeliever and capitalist, could not match. It was funny how reality contravened the mythology. I had been conditioned to believe that the Aryan Nation was the arm of some strident racist paramilitary group and yet it was a story much more fine-grained and subtle, an allegory rather than a fable. Sure it was a church with guns but look how many people found succor here...

Once chapel had concluded, we filed into a vast room with mattresses lining the floor like a checkerboard. The women gravitated to one side of the room, leaving us men to the other. Whatever happened to my dictum of staying close to a beautiful woman? Julia was my unfinished jug of wine, separated from me by a hundred sleeping Christians. I undressed, folding my uniform and stacking it neatly beside my boots following the example of my floor-mates. A prayer played over the loudspeakers, then lights out.

I was in a hurry for the day to end, so I couldn't wait to fall asleep. Nonetheless I found myself awake a few hours later, unaccustomed to dormitory-style liv-

ing where dozens of bodies coughed, turned over, or hummed in their sleep. Moonlight streamed in from the windows, coloring the room gray. I looked around, my attention caught by a solitary figure standing motionless at the female side of the room. I could trace her silhouette; she was nude or maybe wearing underclothes. And, incongruously, her hands were bulky, a pair of gloves... Julia! As I watched, she stepped carefully around the mattresses and bundles of clothes, walking toward the men's side. Was she looking for her brother? I wondered. In the moonlight she was pale and fulgent. Finally she was about a dozen feet away from me, and she stepped even closer. She knelt down in front of me and took my hand in her gloved hand, and pulled me off the floor. *Don't get all excited, I told myself. Just remember, her beauty is nothing more than food her body hasn't excreted.*

We walked together through the sleeping Christians until we reached a door. Then we stepped outside.

She drew me to the base of a large tree, where we sat side-by-side. She removed her gloves and traced her finger on my face, tracing the many lacerations. Then she placed my hand in her palm and I recoiled, startled. In the center of her palm I had felt a wreath of tissue. Undeterred, she took my hand again and gently pressed my fingers into the center of her palm, encouraging me to explore her abrasion. Then she traced her finger along my laceration again, and in a reluctant epiphany I knew—she had the stigmata. And she was drawing a connection to the gashes in her palms and the markings on my face! Was this how the stigmata started? Did she have some kind of antenna to recognize others with the same affliction? Maybe Colonel Bouchet and Sister Ashley were harvesting stigmatics, and Julia and I were part of their collection. This was a freak show, and I was one of the freaks.

Julia laid her hand across my heart to still its thumping. Then she placed her hands on my face and drew me into her so I could hear her heartbeat. Then I closed my eyes—

## CHAPTER 4



# SHIRTS AND SKINS

In the morning my stigmata was in full bloom. Was it epidemiological? Had I caught something from Julia? I doubted it because why would it foliate in my palms? In the morning it seemed less apocryphal, more ordinary, like a bloody nose or a woman's period. *In fact, everyone should have one*, I thought.

I felt calm now that I knew why Colonel Bouchet and Sister Ashley had tracked me. Do they milk their stigmatics? I could imagine a herd of us, gloved and fed on steaks and hamburgers to replenish our iron. Maybe they used us for telegraphs. I shared a chord of telepathy with Julia, a harmony of neurons. She felt pain, I could tell, though she was at the other end of the compound; Brother Thomas had gone missing.

It wasn't my job to sleuth what the colonel and the Sister needed me for, I admonished myself. It was my job to escape from Fresno, to get home to Tijuana, to see my friends, to reunite with Char.

A sharp jolt of pain seared my head. *Don't leave*, Julia whispered in my ear. *Don't think of her*.

"Are you all right?" Sister Ashley asked.

"Yeah, fine," I replied, burying my head in my hands.

Sister Ashley was taken aback when she saw the gloves. Did she not know about the stigmata?

*No*, whispered Julia, *it's just our secret*.

Equanimity gone. There must have been another reason they wanted me.

"Colonel Bouchet wanted to see you this morning," explained Sister Ashley, "but he had to investigate a perimeter breach in Sacramento. That leaves you in my hands."

"No worries," I replied.

Sister Ashley continued. "When you arrived last night, you accused us of being hate-mongers and separatists. Now that you have spent the night as our guest, do you still hold this opinion?"

"No," I replied.

"Our enclave is more an accident than a force of history. As you may know, when the U.S. government defaulted on the federal debt, the developed economies of the world plunged into chaos. The government abandoned the rural corridors, such as the California Central Valley, and concentrated on large metropolitan areas, like New York, San Francisco, etc.

"Since we are one of the few extant religious strongholds, believers of all persuasions have flocked to us. The hate mongering you ascribed to us is only an artifact of our founders. We too have adapted. We were previously known for fomenting race war, white supremacy, disputing the Holocaust. We soon learned there was a greater enemy that all races shared—the federal government.

"In fact, we now work in concert with our brothers and sisters in the Southern Baptist Convention in the rural south. We trade crops and livestock, exchange munitions and conduct joint military exercises. There are only three major religious strongholds left in the United States: ours, the Baptists, and the Church of Mormon. We arm ourselves against the government, but we also face other enemies along our borders. The U.S. is divided into populations that fight over food, land, and petty grievances."

"And you're convinced that I somehow have a role in this?" I asked.

"Yes, if you are who we think you are."

"Does it have anything to do with this?" I asked, lofting my gloved hands before her eyes.

"No. I'm quite surprised to see you have the stigmata, although when I first saw the marks on your face last night, I had a suspicion. May I see?"

"Sure."

She took the gloves off my hands and clinically scrutinized my palms, flipping the hands over to analyze the backs as well. "Sister Julia is the only stigmatic we know of, other than you. You must know that we don't subscribe to such phenomena; or rather, we don't ascribe any heavenly intervention to these occurrences. We have been meeting with Sister Julia and one of our civilian administrators, who is a psychologist, to try to figure out what is causing the

wounds on her hands and feet. But here we see a case of stigmatic transmission, from Sister Julia to you, which will complicate our findings.”

All of a sudden, I had reached my apathy quota. Two days ago I had nothing on my mind and within forty-eight hours I had become a sympathizer and a co-conspirator.

“Your problem is that you have no conviction,” offered Sister Ashley, seeming to read my mind.

“I can’t argue with that,” I replied.

“Each person here has the conviction of her beliefs, and is willing to die for them.”

“Yeah, I really don’t get the whole religious persecution death wish. I admire your principles, but the government isn’t punishing you for who you are or what you did, but simply for what you think. Just think about something else.”

“Many of us feel that our beliefs are more important than our bodies; they live longer.”

“But if someone is pointing a knife at you, and you walk up to the knife and push your chest into it, aren’t you partially responsible for your own persecution? Contributory negligence or something like that?”

“Your lack of conviction concerns me,” she answered. “If you are the person we think you are—”

“Let’s give him a name,” I interrupted, “the person you think I am.”

“Let’s call him *Rasputin*,” she retorted. It was not very flattering. “If you are this Rasputin, then you are a person of inescapable convictions. But maybe you are suppressing your convictions to conceal your identity. Or perhaps you have a conviction, but it is one hundred percent for your mission; you have no conviction for anything else. Then you would exhibit no conviction.”

“I like how you can equally conclude I can be one thing, and the very opposite, in the same breath,” I teased.

“This is not an easy task,” Sister Ashley explained.

“You know, Rasputin is a rather unsavory character and he doesn’t end well. Can we think of another name for this enigmatic figure you believe I am?”

“How about the guy from *Crime and Punishment*?”

“Raskolnikov? The student who kills an old lady? I’d rather we called him Rasputin,” I said. “You really feed my curiosity about who you think I am. Has Rasputin ever harmed you? Does he owe you money?”

“I can’t talk too much about him for fear of giving it away. You know that.”

“I am positive I’ll wheedle the truth out of you eventually,” I said, “After all, I don’t have anything else to do with my time.”

"I'm sure we'll all find out when we're supposed to," concluded Sister Ashley. "Come in," she added, for there was knocking at the door.

In walked Brother Garrett, looking all business. He walked to Sister Ashley's side and bent to her ear to whisper. Then he handed her a sheet of paper.

"Thanks, Brother Garrett," she said. "You can return to your post. Excuse me," she said to me. She unfolded the paper and read its contents in silence. Then she used a flicker to enflame the paper, letting the ashes seesaw to the floor. "Everything is wiretapped," she explained, "so we resort to paper."

"We do the same thing when I'm at home," I replied. "Do you have an emergency?"

"No, no. The colonel will be in Sacramento longer than originally planned. He won't be able to see you this morning."

"Maybe I can go see him..."

"If you don't mind shooting, you're more than welcome."

"How did you meet the colonel?" I asked.

"Colonel Bouchet and I both grew up in a Catholic orphanage in New Mexico. I would never have become friends with the colonel—we are a few years apart in age, he being much younger—were it not for what happened one Halloween night. Two other girls at the orphanage were as old as I—I think we were about twelve, by which age we should have long ago found families—and we had plotted to dress up as murderesses to frighten the younger children. There was an old tale at the orphanage that each child knew by heart, about three sisters who supposedly ate the organs of children that no one had adopted, once they reached a certain age. So while the rest of the kids were at Mass, my friends and I crept into the kitchen and grabbed handfuls of ground meat and plates of liver and other bits from the refrigerator. We slipped into nuns' habits and stationed ourselves on the path between the chapel and the dormitory. When the kids filed out of Mass, we surprised them, and you could not imagine how frightened they were! Most ran from us, hiding in the bushes, but the colonel climbed inside the cab of a truck parked nearby, and in order to save his friends he plowed the truck into the three of us.

"He visited me every day in the infirmary. At first I was aghast to see him, but he was very contrite and eventually we grew to be friends. At a young age we both set our hearts on the ministry, although we could never have predicted our calling would be to such a place as this," she spread her arms out to encompass the camp.

"Whatever happened to the other two girls?" I asked.

"They went to be with Jesus," said Sister Ashley. "It was a miracle I survived. Evidently my lungs collapsed and my heart stopped beating for a while. The doc-

tors actually left the room thinking I had gone to see God. Considering how rudimentary the medical facilities were at the orphanage, I don't know why I'm alive today."

"It's funny," I said, "everyone I've spoken to has ascribed a miracle to their being here."

"Stick around," she replied. "The longer you're here the more you'll see that miracles happen daily."

\* \* \* \*

Julia escorted me to the mess hall where we had a huge breakfast. I was still famished. The Christians sure fed well, and none of the food was synthetic. After breakfast we went for a walk around the compound. I felt a little like Alexis de Tocqueville, observing the Americans in situ. It was already hot, despite the fact it was not even nine in the morning. Chokingly hot, I thought. Only a cult member would live here.

"Hey long-hair, you wanna play?"

It was a shirtless guy, rail-thin and profusely tattooed over his arms, shoulders, and even his semi-gloss bald head. At first I thought he was accosting Julia, since she had the longest hair between us, but lo and behold he was talking to me. He was spinning an American football in his hands.

"Sure!" I agreed, "Sounds good. Julia, is there anywhere I have to be?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Glorious!" he exclaimed "I'm 38." He grabbed my gloved hand in secret handshake. Was that his age? Nickname?

"Bryan," I responded. The handshake became more elaborate, like some kind of hand sex.

"Hey, Julia," said 38, "where's your bro? You wanna play?"

Again she shook her head no, and walked over to a bench nearby for a seat.

"All right," said 38, steering me to the center of this field. "See those white boys over there? Those are the Shirts. We're playing Shirts against Skinheads."

Following his lead, I took off my shirt and tossed it aside on the grass. Good time for a tan, I thought. Because of the stigmata, though, I had to keep the gloves on, so I looked rather silly, shirtless and gloved. We joined the rest of the Skinheads. Backslaps all around. They introduced themselves numerically—43, 67, 19, etc.—so I couldn't tell if these were their football numbers or their names. A giveaway was the fact that their numbers were tattooed on their shoulders, like cattle or racing cars. It was easy to remember who was who. Otherwise I

couldn't distinguish them because they were all hairless and ink-splattered. Wouldn't you just die to be tattooed head to foot and then roll on top of a bleach-white bed sheet? Sometimes my own body was so boring. Bodies just didn't have enough entertaining accoutrements, like a third hand or a matching set of male-female organs.

*Whack!* Head concussion and then I'm down on the ground, flat on my back.

"Wake up, you oopa lumpa!" shouted 19. Evidently I had been musing and inattentive whilst the game started.

"Don't you guys huddle?" I asked.

"Huddling's for pussies; we're hard-core!"

The Shirts huddled, though. They joined hands in prayer and asked God for guidance, plus prayed for forgiveness for us when we tackled them. Then they hiked the ball, and like true anarchists we went after them. Sometimes it was the person carrying the football, other times we went man on man, and occasionally we all went after one single Shirt, piling a dozen tattooed bodies on him until there was no oxygen left. Weird, the tattoos didn't stain you. Then the Shirts prayed again and made a grand show of turning the other cheek and hiking the ball. There was no observance of yardage or downs, and in fact the line of scrimmage never progressed linearly. The ball never changed possession, either. The Shirts made a valiant effort to throw the ball but we flattened it during a skinhead pileup, so it degenerated into a melee. After a while the Shirts sequestered themselves to form a prayer circle, and we just ran around the field helter-skelter, tackling anyone we could catch and piling on as soon as one skinhead was down.

Julia was laughing on the sidelines with each tackle and dog-pile. It was good to see an expression on her face, an improvement over her patent, glazed store-window look. We finally collapsed, sitting on the grass, great furnaces of breath and perspiration.

"So are you guys part of the religious thing?" I asked.

"Yeah," 19 replied. "We're skinheads for Christ. We're just not pussy about it."

"Are you part of the paramilitary?"

"We do Special Ops," 19 explained. "Like if you need a stealth team to invade enemy territory to bag a target. Like last week, a couple of us inserted into El Norte territory to rescue some missionaries. The mofos were about to string 'em up, but we got there in time and had a wicked firefight," he elaborated, making rifle motions with his hands.



"Once every few weeks we pull bodyguard detail for Colonel Bouchet, like when he has a face-to-face parley with the eejits from the Federal Bureau of Worship."

"What does he parley with them about?" I asked.

"The usual—prisoner exchange, like when we swapped two government infiltrators for a healer and a pair of door-to-door Bible-thumpers. Or sometimes we have to bribe the Feds with some cattle or truckloads of corn or something, so they can feed the welfare queens on the East Coast."

"I hate the government," muttered 43. "I love my country, and I hate my government." The skinheads erupted in grunts of approval, like background characters from *Lord of the Flies*.

"Lemme tell you a story," 67 interjected. "I grew up in a real small town, middle-a-nowhere, called Restless in North California. One day they passed a law making it illegal to bury someone once they died, ya know, 'cause of the illegal organ trade. People were digging up bodies to sell the organs and the sheriff couldn't catch 'em, or they were gettin' part of the proceeds or something. So you had to cremate your grandpa when the nursing home finally offed him. I think the Crematorium Lobby was behind the law since they got a lot of new business, ya know, once the law passed. Then the Union of Crematorium Workers went on strike for higher wages, and the bodies began to stack up. People were stowin' their dead rellies in meat lockers and ice chests, and there were a lot more people dyin' all of a sudden, because of the famine.

"You can imagine this did nothing to hurt the organ trade. You'd come home from work, open the fridge for a beer and there'd be Grandpa, minus a lung or a kidney or something. After a while it wasn't just organs that were missing; you opened the fridge for some leftovers and Grandpa's thigh would be gone, or a whole chunk of his ribs. One day you'd come home and there was nothing left of Grandpa but his prosthetics. Turns out the organ traders were partaking of Grandpa's choice cuts because there was nothing left to eat.

"You did not eat your grandpa!" 67 objected.

"That ain't what I said," remonstrated 43.

"Hold him down! Let's see if he's got cannibal breath!" someone else suggested. So they piled upon him, while one brave Skinhead pried apart his jaws, as if he were delivering mouth to mouth, and pretended to inhale.

"I don't smell any human on his breath!" he exclaimed.

"Cannibal pussy!" came the rejoinder, and 43 was pummeled for his shortcoming. After several ignored pleas of "I surrender," 43's breathless assailants lay on the ground, face-up, in a renewed spirit of contemplation.

“So you don’t think that laws are meant to protect people?” I asked.

“Here’s my skinhead philosophy,” explained 19. “People like Hobbes first thought that other people were their enemy, so they gave up their freedom to a neutral third party, AKA the government. But then the neutral third party, AKA the government, gained more power than the people originally had, and then the government became the enemy. Turns out there is always an enemy. You can’t create it or destroy it.”

“I hate the government!” 67 exclaimed. More *Lord of the Flies* acclamation.

“Hey dude, you wanna ride with us?” 67 asked me. He pointed at the road where I could see a formation of motorcycles approaching. Girl skinheads, dressed like fierce Visigoths.

“Maybe later,” I demurred. “I need to talk to the colonel.”

They each mounted the back of a motorcycle while I was sternly appraised by the girl skinheads. The girl carrying 43 on her bike drove up to me and combed her multi-ringed fingers through my hair. “Great scalp,” she said, and they all broke out laughing.

They left in plumes of dust, and then I realized how itchy, filthy, and sore I was from football. I picked up my shirt off the grass and walked over to where Julia sat.

“Thanks for watching!” I said. She nodded her head and smiled in return. I could tell she thought the game was hilarious. “Can we get me to a shower?” I asked. “All this grass and dirt is eating me alive.”

We walked back to the center of the compound, and then I got into the lav, took off my gloves, and showered. Then I emerged from the shower redolent of soap and toweled myself dry. I cleaned out my stigmata and applied new gauze on my hands. *I’m pretty good at football for a stigmatic*, I thought. Of course, it helped that I never actually touched the football. I put on a new pair of gloves and a new uniform. How would I look as a skinhead? I could envision Julia and me on a motorcycle dressed like his and her Visigoths. What was the difference between a Goth and a Visigoth? Were there Visifrench? Visibaptists? Julia knocked on the window to hurry me, all impatient.

Strange sounds emanated from the back of the building, so after I combed my hair I beckoned with my gloved hand for Julia to follow me. There was a door with a sign on it marked “Crèche” which must have been the office of Herr Crèche, merry melody-maker.

As soon as we opened the door though, we found wall-to-wall two-footers. It dawned on me that I had never seen a two-footer before. I had never seen a

two-footer before! Courtesy of the ZCP, of course, but it had never occurred to me that everyone I had seen was over five feet tall.

To speak to a two-footer you had to get down on your knees so you could see them eye-level, and then you couldn't discuss normal things like Brownian motion or the atomic weight of cheese; rather you had to talk about outrageous animal creatures and attenuate your vowels, talking in a singsong voice with exaggerated sunshine. It was brilliant! If they cried you could get them to laugh *toute suite*; if they laughed it was so infectious the whole room would soon be laughing. They were small enough to bounce on your knees three or four at a time and if one were hurt you could lift her off her feet and hold her in your arms until tears became laughter.

What about the story of the boy who sailed on a boat to find an island of monsters, or the book about the numeric, chromatic fish? And in another book a group of two-footers visited a chocolate plant in violation of union regulations. No wonder these two-footers were so open-eyed in amazement. I could barely remember when I was a two-footer. What kind of people would these two-footers grow up to be? What would the world be like when they became my age? What would happen when tanks rolled through the chocolate factory, and paratroopers fought hand-to-hand amongst the confectionary vats?

This is what Dawn and James had wanted! A two-footer formed from the two of them; a leg of one, the eyes of the other, blended into a tiny third. Now I knew why they wanted a baby even if it meant facing the Abortionists, or a swift trip to Utah; and lo and behold I could see in my mind the outline of a woman standing nude in the moonlight, her breasts swollen like droplets, her arms wrapped around the globe of her belly. It was Char.

Bloody hell! When Julia wanted to send a telepathic shock to your head, she could crank up the amperage! Why-not-me why-not-me why-not-me! I pressed my fingers against the sides of my temple and it dialed down the electricity. Then I noticed that with a few taps I could turn her voice on and off. Better on and off than always on.

So how do you break out of a cult, anyway? Obviously I wasn't very good at it, for here I was in cult milieu, with no plans for egress. Now that I didn't have Julia eavesdropping inside my head I could devote more neurons to the chore. I suppose I could play the colonel and the Sister's game, figure out whom they'd been hunting, was I he? etc. and get it over with. But I was sure at the end of the game I'd end up dead. I really needed something like mitosis, where I could split myself in half and leave them with the distaff part while I hied me back to civilization. Lizards did that with their tails.

Now that I had thought about it, I had been gone for little more than twenty-four hours. Char was probably still blocking me with her phone, and Mark and Jenny were probably still in Las Vegas; everyone else would think I was still on holiday. It was only my perception that the hours had telescoped to days—no one else's.

What would I do once I got back, anyway? There was so much happening here that you didn't read about on the Internet, things the media didn't report; but if I went home screaming about how the Feds were oppressing some religious fanatics, would anybody care? Char would care, of course. No one else would care. We were the bourgeoisie and that was us—we didn't care unless it raised the price of coffee or canceled the World Cup.

I've got it! The colonel was in Sacramento investigating a perimeter breach. A perimeter mean there was a line, an edge, a border, and beyond that was freedom.

"I want to see Colonel Bouchet," I told Julia. "Let's go talk to Sister Ashley." Julia was still sulking that I had turned off her connection to my brain but nonetheless she led me out of the crèche.

Later, babies.

\* \* \* \*

Being the Rasputin of Fresno I was able to collect quite an entourage for our road trip to Sacramento. There was Sister Julia, Brother Garrett, Sister Anita, and my football team. We rode in a truck (like pussies, they claimed) while the skinheads followed on motorcycle. It was a fairly boring trip up Highway 99. Nothing to look at but herds of cattle or fields with things growing on them; crops, I supposed. Once we passed a huge landfill stacked perilously with demolished cars, broken furniture, and mangled things that I couldn't identify. The shrieks of seagulls were deafening as they flew in a maelstrom above the mound. Cattle...a water tower...cattle...crops...burnt-out strip malls and suburbs overtaken by weeds and brush...once we passed a sand-choked port with scuttled cargo ships; then cattle...crops...obviously no Pulitzer Prize for Best Scenery.

It was funny to think of all the rotund protein-eaters, stuffing themselves on artificial beef, when several hours away there grazed a multitude of cattle.

What do cult members do on a long, mundane road trip? They sing banal gospel tunes. This elicited more cries of "pussy!" from the skinheads who were in competition to ride the farthest with one wheel in the air. We passed a few military caravans (luckily everyone was on our side), but other than that we had the road to ourselves.

After several hours we exited the freeway and filed through two Aryan checkpoints. Then we drove down a narrow corridor of streets, bounded on either side by tall office buildings. The corridor led to a vast white building that must have been the Capitol building at one time. Sacramento was the capital of North California, right? You could tell it was the Capitol building because of the colonial style columns and arches, as well as the cupola that must have been dead center to some artillery, since blue skies capped its jagged borders. We found the colonel inside, studying a map in the waning shafts of daylight. Those in uniform saluted. I should have been cool enough to salute like everyone else, but didn't react in time.

"At ease," said the colonel. "Any trouble on the road?"

"Nothing, sir!" replied Brother Garrett.

From outside came the sounds of large trucks driving past the Capitol, probably carrying armed Christians.

Everyone was all butch commando. "19, gear up your men for a nighttime insertion five miles behind enemy lines," said the colonel. "Make sure you get your night goggles and thermal scopes. Be ready for a briefing by twenty-one hundred hours."

"Yes sir!" replied 19. Salute. About-face. Gone.

"Julia," he continued, "take this message to Captain Darden at the First Street bunker along the riverfront." He handed her a folded note. "His eyes only."

"Yes sir!" Salute. About-face. Gone.

It was down to Brother Garrett, Sister Anita and me.

"Walk with me," the colonel instructed. He spun around and began walking quickly into the center of the Capitol building. I had to run to catch up.

"Julia's brother, Thomas, was caught by the Feds last night as he was traveling north through Sacramento," the colonel explained. "It seems the Feds have been pumping him for information. He doesn't know much, of course, but he somehow told them enough to excite their attention. They've been driving troops in all morning long. The manpower I don't care much about; we've always been able to hold the line, but they've also brought in some fliers. If they can get those off the ground they can fly straight down the Central Valley, from Sacramento to Fresno, unimpeded. We have to take out the fliers before they are airborne. And we have to get Thomas back. We have to find out what he may have told them, of course, and we want him safe in God's arms again."

"Was he a double agent?" asked Sister Anita.

Brother Garrett was in the throes of silent prayer.

"No, Thomas isn't an agent. He didn't want to get caught. He was trying to get *away*. Besides, he didn't knowingly carry any secrets worth their attention."

"Amen," concluded Brother Garrett, topping off his prayer.

"So what do we do now?" asked Sister Anita.

"We'll continue to hold the line and keep those fliers grounded. Then, once it's dark, we can take the fliers out. No word about Brother Thomas to Julia, got it?"

We all agreed.

"Brother Garrett, I want you to go to the bunker on J Street to help reinforce the line there. Sister Anita, I want you to work with Captain Darden on a diversion strategy. Remember what we did in Lancaster?"

More yes sirs. More salutes. More about-faces. Gone.

"I don't know what got the Feds' attention," said Colonel Bouchet when we were alone. "They've been on the offensive against the survivalist camps in Oregon for the last three months. They usually don't attack on two fronts like this. They don't have enough manpower to fight more than one of us at a time. I do have my suspicions..." He looked at me appraisingly. "I want you to understand something about Sister Ashley and me," he added.

"What's that?"

"Before we joined the Aryan Nations, we made a lot of mistakes. We knew we had a mission, a calling from God, but we didn't know what it was. We grew up in an orphanage togeth—"

"She told me," I interrupted.

"Good. Because we grew up in an orphanage, we didn't have a sense of direction or purpose—we only had an immense hunger for more than we started with. Do you know what I mean? Do you have a sense of mission?"

"No," I replied. "This little kidnapping episode has opened my eyes to how little sense of mission I actually have."

"Then again, you may have already achieved your mission," Colonel Bouchet replied in his formulaic way. "Or maybe your mission requires a degree of opacity and diffidence to help you function unencumbered." He paused. Game theory was becoming a real tongue twister. "Anyway, if you were to read our biographies, you'd be surprised by the conflicting things we've done, the lack of theme or harmony. Would you believe that the same impulse that drove us to work as caregivers in a plague hospice also drove us to be bounty hunters for a time? We also spent ten months lashed to the trunk of a tree to learn self-denial; then spent the money we earned from telling about our ordeal on expensive food, foreign cars, and lavish parties. We were celibate for five years, and then in a single

month had hundreds of anonymous sex partners at bathhouses and swingeramas. Do you see what I'm getting at, Bryan?" he asked, in a fever. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No," I conceded.

"The same fervor that drove one excess provoked the other. Where we erred was in not recognizing the core passion that drove us to overindulgence; we only sensed the gluttony and its fruits. After twenty years of debauchery and privation, we finally realized that our excesses would never satisfy us. It was then that we joined the Church of the Creator and began serving the Lord."

"How do you know this isn't another one of your excesses?" I asked.

He was clearly taken aback.

"You're trying to justify the foulness of your excesses, your 'road,' by the sanctity of your destination," I continued. "You've got this weird math that says you can raise the dead one day, slay the living the next, and each act zeroes the other. That's bullocks."

The colonel looked stricken. It seemed important to him that I understood and approved of his past, and fatal if I didn't. *What do I care*, I thought. The colonel had his own philosophy, and if he wanted expiation for his own freaking past, what did I really care?

"Or maybe you've joined this mission, not as a result of your rationalization, but because something has truly lifted you out of your past..." I added. This seemed to calm him. I guess I was getting better at game theory.

Two soldiers ran into the room, snapped to attention. After a pause the colonel saluted in response.

"Sir, Captain Darden told me to report that the fliers are airborne," said one soldier.

The other added, "The captain said enemy tanks are heading down J Street."

"Tanks?" the colonel asked, bewildered. Just then sirens ruptured the air. Then, overhead we saw the fliers stream atop the fractured bowl of the cupola. "Watch him!" said the colonel, vis-à-vis me, as he quickly left the room.

I began to follow. "Where you going?" asked a guard.

"The colonel said to watch me, not stop me," I said.

They bickered over what the colonel had said. By the time I persuaded them to let me go, the colonel was gone. We walked out to the top of the stairs (wasn't there a Greek name for the top of the stairs? They had a name for everything else). It was like watching WWI on one side and WWII on the other. The Feds had tanks, fliers, and numbers; the Christians had guns and cover. The Christians didn't even use electronics to communicate, relying on courier and paper instead.

The tanks just crashed through barricades, rolled over bunkers, crushing fallen soldiers like the top of the Jurassic food chain. Then the fliers soared overhead, dropping firebombs. The tanks began lining up at the far end of the Capitol Mall, facing the building. Then in came the fliers, wafting between the tall buildings, pitching fireballs to the ground with each roll through the air.

Whose idea was it to hold forth in the Capitol building? I thought. Where else would the Feds converge, if not the Capitol? Obviously they'd be coming right at us. I turned to talk to the guard and *whoosh!* a massive fireball blasted the ground. Great flames and plumes of smoke filled the air. I lost sight of the soldiers, lost sight of the Capitol building itself. This was when you needed one of those machines to get you the heck out of town, dump you in the middle of a Bach performance or a calculus class instead. Well, maybe not a calculus class.

"Bryan!" shouted a voice. Then a strong hand pulled my shoulders out of the blaze. The hand kept pulling me beyond the blaze, and into one of the buildings nearby. I couldn't clear my lungs. I coughed for a long time; my eyes were useless. After a while the coughing subsided, I rubbed my eyes until I could see milky forms.

"I am Captain Darden," said the voice behind the hand.

"Thank you for pulling me out of the fire, Captain," I aspirated, between great gulps of air. "You saved my life."

"I am not saving your life to sacrifice everyone else's," said the captain, going past my theme.

"What?"

"The colonel knows what the Feds want. They want you. They heard about you from Brother Thomas. That's why they brought in the fliers and the tanks. They pulled those down from their northern front. But the colonel doesn't want to give you up."

"Why on earth do the Feds want me?"

"I don't know. I don't care. All I know is that I will not sacrifice my command and my church for you."

"So what are you going to do with me?" I asked. "Turn me over to them?"

"No. If I turn you over to them, there's nothing to stop them from demolishing us completely. Instead, I'm sending you away. To Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't care if the Feds destroy that den of iniquity looking for you. Can you imagine, Bryan, what this world would be like if there were no place for God's flock to congregate? If the Feds wiped us off the planet, imagine what this world would be like! It's only our prayers that keep this world from self-combusting. I will not let you be an instrument of our destruction."



"Okay, okay!" I agreed. "I'm with you. I don't want to destroy your church or the civilized world either."

Behind me I heard the clap of leather boots.

"At ease," said Captain Darden.

I turned around, and there stood 43.

"Godspeed," said Captain Darden. "Once you get out of Sacramento, we will tell the Feds that you've taken him. After that, only prayers can save you."

Salute. About-face. Gone.

I traveled on the back of 43's motorcycle through the fiery streets, to an on-ramp that headed us first north, then west on Highway 80. Behind us we could hear the blaze of battle over the gentle *whirr* of the motorcycle engine. Highway 80 was a flat stretch of cement, and we met no cross-traffic until we reached the Bay Area an hour later. We traveled on Highway 37 until we reached 101; then we drove south. By the time we reached the Golden Gate Bridge, it was cold and dark. 43 drove me down a potholed road until we arrived at the foot of the bridge. The moon streamed between the two collapsed ends of the bridge, silhouetting the entrails of cables, cement, and steel that swayed in the cold wind.

"Here ya go, bro," said 43, stopping the motorcycle. I walked to the edge of the water and felt it with my fingers. My hand felt brittle with the cold. I stealthily combed the shoreline for a boat. Nothing.—I'd have to swim.

"Thanks, bro," I replied. "Thanks for the football game."

"No worries," he replied.

I took off my boots and uniform and tied them into knots. If I thought it looked cold when I was fully dressed, I really got a clue as to what the weather was like. *Might as well just jump in headfirst and get the agony over with*, I thought. The cold water sucked every molecule of air out of my body. When I first surfaced, I stopped for a moment to catch my breath.

43 was watching me, saying "Don't be a pussy!"

This was obviously not an Amish swimming pool. Weren't there sharks in the water? Sharks, Nazi submarines, broken beer bottles. I swam more sideways than forward. Every few seconds a wave lifted me up, leaving me stroking the air instead of the water. *Just focus on my stroke...focus on my stroke...*

When I finally reached the opposite side, I didn't dare walk to shore. That's where the broken glass and hypodermic syringes would get you. I swam as close to shore as I could, and stood up when I was able to set my feet on a slimy rock. I put the boots on and stepped to shore. My body had grown used to the water temperature, but the air temperature, with the wind, sucked another ten degrees away. How do people live in places like this? I'd sit in my house all day, praying

for global warming. Since there was no use waiting for that, I squeezed the ocean water out of my uniform, dressed like a waterlogged Aryan, and walked up to the road to hitch a ride.

## CHAPTER 5



# IF IT ONLY HAS ONE STRING, IT'S PROBABLY NOT A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

No surprise—drivers in San Francisco weren't inclined to pick up a soaking wet hitchhiker dressed in Aryan regalia. I held my thumb out as cars drove past but had little hope of getting a ride. Discouraged, I began walking toward town.

I had things to think about:

Why was the Aryan Nation/Church of the Creator, Western States after me?

- *No idea*

Why were the Feds after me?

- *No idea*

Was anyone else after me?

- *No idea*

Were the Feds following me now?

- *No idea*

I surmised that I wasn't being followed because it was one thing for the Feds to terrorize a fringe religious group in the middle of nowhere, but it was a completely different matter for them to infiltrate the metropolis. The bourgeoisie was the government's bread and butter. It would be like a cattle rancher attacking his own herd; we were the government's herd, and they wanted us to be well fed and complacent. See how much of a civics lesson I'd gotten in the last forty-eight hours?

Once I got to the city, I knew I'd be back in my own element. I could grab a phone, call Char, and buy a plane ticket back to Tijuana. I'd send the colonel and the Sister a greeting card: Thanks for the kidnapping!

*I hope the fighting has stopped*, I thought. I hope Captain Darden was right, that the Feds were after me and would leave the Christians alone once I was gone. Was Julia okay? Hmmmm...that I *could* check on my own. I tapped my temple to see if I could communicate with Julia long-distance.

"I'm glad you're all right," her voice rang joyfully in my ear.

"Ditto," I echoed back. "Can't stay on the line. You shouldn't know where I am in case the Feds come for me."

"No, come back to me," she pleaded; but I clicked her off.

I walked on foot to the Palace of Fine Arts. Luckily it was one of the seven wonders that hadn't been destroyed by Earth Liberation or some other anarcho-terrorist group. It was a beautiful set of domed archways formed of cinnamon and decorated with Etruscan warlords at the top. I lay down in the gravel to sleep, battling both cold and fatigue...

When I awoke, the air was vitrified with fog. My uniform was brittle from frost, my bladder was full, and I was shivering uncontrollably. Luckily, in SF there is always a trashcan fire when you need one. I espied dirty spirals of smoke distilling from a barrel in the vicinity of the marina.

What to do first—warm up by the fire or de-bladder? I opted to de-bladder. I pulled off my gloves and noticed my gashes were healing. Maybe my stigmata was only temporary, or maybe it was menstrual, the third of the month. Having completed my ablutions, I collected an armful of fallen branches as my offering, and crossed the street to the marina where a ring of figures circled the trash can fire. I set the branches into the trashcan, careful not to dislodge any embers into the air.

"When was the last time you?" asked one of the figures in the circle. It was difficult to see anyone's face; each person was shrouded in stacks of blankets and coats.

"I what?" I inquired.

"Et any meat," he replied.

To tell the truth, of course, it had been yesterday afternoon while I was riding in the truck en route to Sacramento—canned army rations. I wondered if they could smell the meat on my breath.

"Ages," I replied. "I haven't had meat in ages."

"She-eeeeee-i-it," replied my questioner, attenuating the vowel. "You?" he continued, gesturing with his shoulder to the person beside me.

"Pigeon count?"

"Course pigeon don't count!" came the reply.

"Las' time I had meat," the person replied, after some cogitation, "Las' time I had meat, there was fish in this here bay."

"Hor hor hor!" chortled my questioner. "Las' time I had meat, you could see the sun in this here sky!"

"Hey, las' time I had meat," someone else volunteered, "you could buy a newspaper for ten dolla."

"A what!"

"A newspaper. Sumthen to wipe your arse with."

"Hey Sandy, las' time I had meat, you were pretty enough to shag!"

"Shut up, you old pervert!" once-pretty Sandy cried and began striking the bundled figure beside her with a handbag.

"Wanna know las' time I had meat?" piped a voice; but clearly attention had moved on to provoking once-pretty Sandy to strike her partner again.

"Knock 'em, Sandy, knock 'em! He said you wern pretty! He called you a *dog*. He said he wooden shag you with a hermaferdite dick!"

"A hermaferdite dick's twice the size a your'un!" she shrieked, batting him on the head every odd syllable. "You cooden get your dick up if you was to shove a broom-stick fru the middle of it!" She went all eggbeater on him, head down, arms flailing.

As charming as the Dickensian moment was, I steered myself away from them and focused on the fire. You tried to avoid eye contact lest you became the next punching bag.

"What you got?" asked the bundle beside me.

"What?"

"What you got in you pocket?"

"Nothing," I replied, but out of curiosity I drilled my cold hand into the cargo pocket near my thigh.

"Sw-weet!" he said, appraising the army knife I fished from my trousers. "How much you want fo dat? I give you five thousen dolla."

I placed the knife in his outstretched palm, and he counted out five wadded bills to place in mine. "How much you gimme fo dis?" he immediately posed to the bundle beside him. "You gimme ten thousen dolla."

The bundle scrutinized the knife, and soon a ten thousand note plus my knife exchanged hands.

"What else you got?" he asked again.

What *else* had I carried free-style across the Bay? I probed deeper into my trouser pocket and pulled out a compass, a scope, a meal opener.

"You a regler Walmar!" my buyer exclaimed. "How much you want fo dat? No," he added, as I pointed to the compass. I shifted my finger to the scope. "Fo dat."

"Ten thousand dollars," I replied.

"Ten thousen dolla! She-it. Why you want ten thousen dolla? Why you jus' don't cut open a vein?" He proffered his wrists to me.

I made a motion to put the things back in my pocket, but he interrupted, "Okay, okay. Ten thousen dolla!" He waved the bill he had just earned from the sale of my army knife and I swapped it for the scope.

There was a bidding war for the compass, which was odd because being next to the ocean you would think knowing where north was would be de rigueur. Nobody was interested in the meal opener, except for a crazy old man who, I think, just wanted to part of the commerce. He first offered me some old-style money for it, and then he offered me some porn. Each time I declined, the other figures around the fire taunted him, so I agreed to exchange the meal opener for a cash card, even though no one ever used them anymore, since it was so easy to track what you spent your money on. He was very happy with his purchase, and experimented with it to see what the heck it could do.

It was going to take me forever to get warm and dry. What kind of salamander was it that could live in fire? A hellbender? Once again, human beings were deprived of some really useful characteristics by phylogeny. Or was that ontogeny?

The old man was testing the meal opener on this collar around his neck. As he couldn't see what his hands were doing, he moved on to the figure beside him, tunneling into the mounds of blankets and clothing with the meal opener.

"What the hell you doen, crazy foo!"

"Practicin' for the next roundup," the old man explained.

"That thing ain' gonna help you 'scape the roundup, eejit," the figure replied.

"What's the roundup?" I asked.

"You ain' been in a roundup?"

"I'm from out of town," I explained.

"That's why you ain't wearen a leash, I bet. You here long enough, they round you ass up and strap a leash on you skinny neck. Then, whenever they want you, they know where you is."

"Why would they care where you were?"

"Man, you is from outer town. It's the Disease Control, the Seedy See. They inject eubola up you arse and count down how long you take to die."

"How do you know it's Ebola?" I asked.

"Cause we dyin', mofo! You get caught in the roundup and you dead in six monf; and you don't die pretty neither. You die with shite comin' outta you nos-trils and snot comin' outta you arse. You can't even get a dog to lick you hand. That's why I say, eat, shite, and be merry, 'cause tomorrow you may get the eubola."

"Do any of you have Ebola?" I asked.

"No!" they all exclaimed, in unison.

"I got a helluva rash on my belly," meal opener man volunteered. "Wanna see?"

"No thank you," I demurred.

"So, if you've all been rounded up before, why don't you have Ebola?" I pressed.

"Cause they spearmint on you ass. First, they give you herpes genitalia, and if s'vive that they give you goner-ia; and if you ain't a goner, they give you m-n-o deficient virus. Las' but not leas', they give you eubola. Looke here—see these shots?" with that, he dropped his trousers to unveil his arse, where he pointed to a constellation of puncture marks.

"Ol' foo! You always showin' people you ass!" he was admonished.

I was pretty sure they were all crazy; the CDC was probably immunizing them, not infecting them; but I was learning a lot of new things about the Feds so I was no longer one hundred percent positive about governmental benevolence. Either way it was a reminder to me to abbreviate my stay, lest I catch something.

"Well, thanks for the fire," I said, preparing to leave.

"Where you goan? Can we go?"

"I found a job," I said.

"No freakin' thanks! No way, baby! Jobs are for basteds!" came the retorts.

I knew I had to get out of my paramilitary gear and into civilian clothes quickly; besides attracting attention, the uniform was redolent of an alkaline smell from the swim in the Bay, and now smelled of burned wood from the fire. Time for a nice, hot shower...

As I left my new friends behind, I tried to scheme a way to shower and get new clothes. The money I had earned was enough for breakfast, but it wouldn't be enough for a shower or a trip to the wardrobe section. Was there another way to make some money? With a stringed instrument and some musical talent, I could try the street corner violin gig, but of course I had no stringed instrument or musical talent. What about some sidewalk chalk art? I'd seen people make pocket money that way, chalking sunsets and crowd scenes, and I always dropped bills myself. Alas, no chalk, no skills. I had absolutely zero right-brain gifts to profit from. My stigmata was healing so I couldn't raise a dollar from that kind of exhibition, either. Of course, this would be attracting attention and I needed to be unnoticed.

I was getting closer to downtown SF; I could tell because of the prevalence of swingeramas, alkie joints, and bathhouses. Hey, where else do they have showers and loose-lying clothes—a bathhouse!

The first bathhouse I came to was called Gize Hump; I didn't like the name of that so I continued down the street until I reached a bathhouse called All Friends. Was this a Quaker bathhouse? The name sounded innocuous enough so I walked up to the entrance, where the proprietor eyed me from boot to cap, checked me for weapons, and let me in. Once inside I stood still to allow my pupils to adjust to the dimness. There was the requisite music, stale cigarette odor, the discord of a dozen conversations. Shouldn't they pipe in fresh cigarette smoke, to replace the stale? There were boyos going at it, tangled lumps of bodies like sea coral, criss-crossers, one-armed billies having their wicked ways. I turned down several carnal invitations before making it to the showers. I kicked a one-armed billy out of the room so I could shower unmolested.

The steam and jets of hot water felt fantastic. I soaped myself several times until I was sure I had shed a whole layer of epidermis. Then I pulled a towel from the towel rack and wiped myself dry. Open the first locker—clothes too big. Then too small. Too last year. Nasty smell. Women's clothes. Finally I found some clothes I was willing to wear. God, I hope this person brought some clean socks and underwear, because there was no way I was going to put on his clothes without. Awesome—I was lucky.

I dressed quickly lest my unwitting benefactor return. Then I scouted his ID from his wallet to write down his name and address. Back in Tijuana I could send



his clothes and some thank-you money through the post. I put the uniform in a bag, finished my grooming, and walked back onto the street.

The first thing I did was go to Mack's and buy a fruit plate for brekky. Then I bought a bunch of McMunchies. I walked back to the marina and handed out the McMunchies to my pestilential friends. While they ate, I slowly fed the uniform one piece at a time into the fire. No one complained about the excess smoke, especially from the boots. What's there to complain about when you're feasting on a McMunchie? "Back to work," I said, to discourage any followers. Then I left.

I flagged down a rickshaw-wallah (could I trust him? Remember what the last rickshaw-wallah had done; they were probably all part of a cabalistic order that sold corpses to surgical colleges) who pedaled me through the crowded streets to the Financial District. Everyone was all helter-skelter, trying to get to their office on time. It was like, at 8:01 A.M. anyone found moving on the streets would be shot dead and their bodies mutilated, or maybe lions were loosed to roam the streets for latecomers.

*Remember to tip the rickshaw-wallah over-generously this time,* I told myself. *God only knows what cult he belongs to.*

I found a Buckyball's on Market Street ("The strongest coffee on the planet"™) and with my last thousand I bought a cup of coffee. Then I sat on a stool and eyed the suits queuing at the counter. *Here's a perfect sample,* I thought. He was trying to carry on a nervous conversation with the coffee monger, fishing for a date. I went to the counter for a napkin, and as I brushed past him I reached into his pocket and snatched his phone. After he left (no date, the coffee monger was unimpressed), I examined his phone. It was pretty easy to hack his thumbprint lock; I dialed an anonymous line and patched the call through to a connection I knew Mark was monitoring. "Ping!" I said.

"Busy," he replied. *Busy* was our signal to use level 5 encryption. It was our own encryption scheme that used the route of a packet through the Internet, jitter, latency, and other signals rather than the contents of the packet for encryption. Then we tapped Igami-Morse code to each other, and it showed up as text. It would take forever on this phone.

"Line unsafe," Mark signaled. Then, "Jenny is gone."

"OMG! Is she OK?"

"Yup. OTR". OTR meant "on the run."

"What happened?"

"Remember her inv. on welfare system on e coast?"

"Si"

"She found out too much. FCC raided her publisher's office. All arrested. Extra day in Vegas saved us."

"What you going to do?" I asked.

"Can't say. Am safe in Vegas for now." Then, "Must disconnect. VCD."

"VCD," I replied; and he dropped the line.

Still using the anonymous line I tried to reach Char, but she was continuing to block me. What the heck would she do to me if I pulled something really egregious, like sleep with her best friend? *Do not piss this woman off*, I told myself. I didn't want to check my own phone for messages because that would be an utter giveaway, and if the Feds were monitoring my own voicemail they'd know it was I instantly. Instead, I went to *alt.outdoors.bogs.alternativefuels.peat* to see if Char had read the note I had posted yesterday morning, at the Amish. Unbelievable—there were like twenty thousand replies! How on earth was I going to figure out if one of these replies was Char's? I read through a couple of the responses. Boy, were people really lonely.

In came the phone's owner, in search of. I erased the call history, wiped my prints off the phone, and visited the counter again, where I slipped the phone back into his jacket pocket just as he leaned over the counter to ask the coffee monger, "Pardon me, but I think I left my phone in here."

"Don't think so," replied the coffee monger. Just then the phone in the man's pocket began to ring.

"Oh my God!" he exclaimed, "Here it is, in my pocket! I swear it wasn't there before!" He was quite exclamatory. He lifted the phone out of his pocket and pressed it to his ear. "Nobody," he told the coffee monger in bewilderment. They both laughed. "Nobody's supposed to call anyway," Phone Man continued.

"Do you like ballroom dancing?" the coffee monger asked Phone Man.

"I love ballroom dancing!" Phone Man replied, all aquiver. A yellow feather sprouted from his neck and he fell straight to the ground. The coffee monger jerked backward and collided with the wall behind him, spraying Antigua and mocha and cappuccino all over the place. Then the people in the coffee queue jerked in different directions like posers for Guernica and collapsed to the floor. Down I dropped. A black rifle barrel appeared through the open door, then a black boot, and in stepped a soldier in a black uniform. Three more soldiers followed, each tracking the room through the scopes on their rifles. They quickly located Phone Man; one soldier brushed the yellow dart from his neck and pocketed it while another pried the phone from his fingers. He opened the phone, inspected it, and then placed it inside a pouch. Then he unfolded a body bag on the floor beside Phone Man. Two of them rolled Phone Man into the bag, and

zipped it shut. The soldier lifted the bag over his shoulder while the other soldiers checked the bodies on the floor. More shots were fired, little pneumatic hisses; then the soldiers were gone, body bag and all.

I ran to the bodies. Look into their eyes. Look into their eyes. They are dead and I'm alive. They are dead and I'm alive. They are dead and I'm alive. It was obvious the Feds had traced my calls on the man's phone. Then they called back on the phone to locate me. God only knows what they would do with Phone Man once they realized he was not I. All you had to do was order coffee in the vicinity of me to get whacked. Because of my stupid phone calls, these people got whacked.

I looked outside, no sign of the soldiers. Out I stepped. The streets were empty. I thought I would have a crowd to lose myself in, but instead I walked the street alone, as the wind whipped and twisted sheets of paper like jellyfish. I walked down Market Street toward the Embarcadero, but when I reached the Underground I walked down the stairs, to the first landing, and sat. Obviously I couldn't go back to Tijuana. The bloody Gestapo would kill in my neighborhood. Maybe I should go hands-up to the Feds; maybe it would lower the body count. That was a joke. I didn't want to give in to the government; I wanted to fight, to crush the Feds as they had done to the people in the coffee shop.

A woman with an instrument case emerged from the Underground and walked up the stairs. You could tell she was a panhandler because of her washed-out clothes and wiry hair. When she reached me, she stopped, leaned on her case, and asked, "You play?"

"Nope. I listen, though," I replied.

"Good enough." She sat down beside me, opened her instrument case, and withdrew a clarinet. As she began playing, someone else appeared at the top of the stairs with a violin. He walked down the stairs until he reached us; then he began playing his violin. Soon other panhandlers joined in; we had a string section, a wind section, and even some percussionists. Finally a vocalist joined us, and we had a nice panhandler concert. While I allowed the music to distract me from my plight, another man emerged from the Underground with his instrument case, and walked slowly up the stairs. He set the case down and withdrew this funky instrument, with only one string. He fitted a narrow shaft into the instrument, raised it to his shoulders and a second later I was staring at a steel X pointed at my eye sockets. It was a crossbow. The musicians grabbed their instruments and cases and fled; more crossbows appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

"You run, I shoot you," explained the man in front of me.

"Who are you? The Freemasons? The Rosicrucians?" I asked.

No reply, but he jerked the crossbow to his left, gesturing me down the stairs and into the Underground.

How nice for them—they had their own train. It was parked between the boarding stripes, where the commuter trains usually sat. Down came the crossbows and *click*, my right arm was cuffed before I could even react. I really should have tried out for a different sport in college. You don't hone your response time on the swim team. The doors whisked apart and we walked inside the car. We rushed to the rear of the car, where I was quickly cuffed to a seat. Boxing, I thought, that would have given me some reflexes.

For an instant there was a snapshot of halted conversations, dropped jaws, and frozen gestures as other passengers watched me board; but an instant later, the festivities resumed. My head lurched backward as the train pulled out. Dreadlocks, piercings, tattoos, almost no one over twenty-one—I knew where I was; on a train ride with the boys and girls of Earth Liberation.

"I know who you are," I exclaimed, with audible glee. I was happy to have figured out something without being told first. "You're the lunatics who blow up tourist attractions."

Again the halted conversations, dropped jaws, and frozen gestures. Crossbow reached into his pocket, and a second later circled my mouth with a swath of duct tape. *Muffum fum* was about all I could say. What if I wanted to whistle?

The boys and girls of Earth Liberation knew how to have a good time on a train. They laughed, sang, smoked, half-shagged, slept, played poker, played chess, drew on each other, braided each other's dreads while the train bored through the dark tube under the bay. I tried to figure out which sport, had I taken it in school, would have given me the dexterity to dodge duct tape and handcuffs. Football? Tennis? Lacrosse? The problem was that I learned my motor skills in a medium much denser than air (water) and my reflexes were viscous.

Then the train slowed and gradually came to a stop somewhere beneath the bay. Other than the light from our car, the tunnel was black. The doors whisked apart again; Crossbow uncuffed me from the seat and pulled me up and out of the car as the boys and girls stared after us. We walked along a gravel surface, away from the light of the train, to the dark perimeter of the tunnel. We reached a door and Crossbow elbowed it open. Behind the door it was also dark, but the distant light from the train cast a yellow triangle on the floor. Crossbow led me inside, and we walked several steps into the room. *Click*. I was cuffed again, to a pipe or piece of metal on the wall. It happened so fast I had continued walking, and I wrenched my arm as the anchored cuff pulled me to a stop.

"*Mufurum thunt*," I exclaimed ("I shite in the palms of your ancestors' outstretched hands.")

Nonplused, Crossbow returned to the partially lit doorway and, with his hand on the knob of the door, stepped through and shut it behind him. The triangle of light snapped like scissors and there was nothing but darkness. Bloody hell.

*There must be a cask of Amontillado down here somewhere*, I thought. With my free hand I pulled the duct tape off my mouth. I felt around in the darkness to see what my hand was cuffed to. It was a grill of some sort; vertical pipes arranged accordion-style on the wall, probably one of those really old radiators that pumped steam through to heat a room. I could slide my hand vertically up and down the grill, with enough range of motion to be able to sit on the floor if I wanted to. I stuck the strip of duct tape to the grill; you never know when you might find a use for duct tape.

My eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, but no depth or outlines formed. No light entered the room through the just-closed door. Now I knew what "hermetically sealed" meant.

A moist, lichenous smell pervaded the room, the scent of unvisited cellars and centuries-old cemeteries. The wall felt damp and was coarse and furrowed, as if chiseled from rock by the rough movement of glaciers. I inhaled black air and exhaled black air symmetrically; black air is neither created nor destroyed.

## A

Why was I so docile? Why did I let him walk me on a leash and chain me to this wall? I must have been numb, I thought. I couldn't forget those poor sods in the coffee shop. They had died for my sins; it was a reverse messiah complex. What were my sins, anyway? Why were so many people after me?

There must have been something I had done to piss somebody off.

Childhood? Nothing—check

School? College? Nothing, nothing—check, check.

Adulthood? Last year? Yesterbloodyday? Nothing, nothing, nothing—check, check, check. I couldn't imagine anything...

The worst thing I had done in childhood was tying my friend to the rails of a train track one day, and then pretending I heard a train approach. Maybe he became the attorney general or the grand ayatollah and was very unforgiving. Actually, that wasn't my most abominable childhood act; I had set fire to a wooden fort my friends and I were playing in. Everyone escaped unharmed except for the snakes and lizards we had collected in jars. Then there was the kid who always followed me around, so I made her undress and stole her clothes so

she had to run home naked. In retrospect, it was a wonder some disgruntled childhood playmate hadn't whacked me sooner.

On the other hand, kids did these things to each other all the time. How many times had I been beaten up, chased by thugs on bicycles, stabbed with writing instruments, and taunted for being a bed wetter (not true) and yet I wasn't chasing after the malefactors of my youth.

What about Dawn and James, aspiring parents, or Jenny, rogue journalist? Were they being run out because of me, or was I being run out because of them?

It's an interesting thing about herds. You watch the television programs where the predators circle the herd and pounce on the weakest member. Never do you see the remaining members of the herd come to their stricken mate's defense; they simply continue to ruminate whilst the predators group and eviscerate their prey. That's how the bourgeoisie was. The IRS confiscates your neighbor's flat and you continue watching soccer on the telly. Homeland Defense rounds up your coworker on sedition charges, but you still make your commuter train on time. The government circles the weakest member of the herd and the herd becomes stronger.

*If I ever get out of this room, I thought, I am going to find out who killed those sods in the coffee shop.*

## B

I definitely did not have the mind to tolerate long periods of time without stimulation. Like swimming—before I traveled to the edge of the pool I was already sick of the tedium. Here I sat in the dark, no sound, no stimuli. An hour may have passed, but more likely it was only a minute. *Hey, I thought, give Julia a holler with stigmatic telepathy.* I tapped my forehead and waited to feel the electricity in my synapses, but no joy. Tap...and nothing. Maybe telepathy could not permeate the walls of my underground chamber; maybe she was incommunicado; maybe I had dreamed the whole thing up. Maybe I'd never had the stigmata, maybe nor did she, maybe I'd never met her, never was abducted by the cult in the first place. Wouldn't it be sweet to open my eyes and be transported to wherever this never happened? Yet I closed my eyes, opened them again, and was still immersed in darkness.

## C

I dream it is I strapped to the train track while my friend taunts me. I hear the Doppler effect of the oncoming train; when it passes me, I awaken. Have I been

mutilated by the train? I check my extremities with my unchained hand before I remember where I am.

## D

A man lies on a wooden bed; he is unclothed except for a sheet covering his organs. His feet are tethered to a wooden block at one end of the bed; his hands are equally restrained at the other end. The rope is sinuous and rough, like cable wire; it abrades the man's wrists and ankles, which are matted with blood. His breath is exaggerated, as if he were inhaling glue rather than air. He struggles to inflate his rib cage; it does not expand and contract with the ease of reflex, but with the labor of weightlifting. With each heavy exhalation, his flesh scrapes along the splintered wood, sloughing skin and hair while accreting shards of wood. His face is averted.

Another man stands beside the wooden bed; you can only see his arms, clasped over his chest. The rest of him is obscured in shadow. "What have you to confess?" he asks the supine man.

"Nothing!" the man shrieks.

The arms unfold; the hands circle a lever attached to the side of the bed. As the arms pull the lever, the ropes tighten on the arms and legs of the man on the rack. A horrid, inchoate shriek escapes the lying man's lips. It is an unbearable, unassuaged wail.

When the howl subsides, the torturer asks again, "What have you to confess?"

"I have nothing to confess!" his victim cries. "Nothing to confess!"

The torturer presses his palm gently on his victim's cheek. "If you confess," he warmly advises, "your pain will vanish instantly. You will feel, as Poe calls it, sweet *Nepenthe*. It is not just your body that will find succor, but a soothing balm will pervade your soul. Your sins will be raised unto God, who will forgive you. Can you not welcome the atonement that confession brings? It is more blissful than wine, more joyous than a drug; copulation does not bring the ecstasy that confession promises."

"Then you can confess for the both of us," the supine man replies. "I have nothing to tell you."

"So be it," the other man replies with equanimity. His hands find home on the lever, and once again he pulls—

I awaken bathed in sweat, my heart pounding forte. I cannot inhale. "I have nothing to confess!" I shout. "I have nothing to confess!"

## E

Dear Char:

In the worst moment of my life, I can only think of you. You surround me; your image comforts me in my life's worst moment, and you have given me its best. You have the arms, the cheeks, the lips, and the embrace that bring me serenity. I know why Muslims beat themselves with sticks and why itinerant villagers see the Virgin Mary in chiaroscuro, for they and I lack the expression that equals our passion. What would Shakespeare have done without the sonnet? He would have cut himself, set his hair on fire. I lack the organ to testify how I feel. I write in a cave, in the dark, on parchments of air, and my words are gone.

## F

I will marry the first person who opens the door, male or female, and consummate the union on the spot. I feel like the genie, captive in the lamp for a thousand years. Days have passed. I can discern from the frequency of my ablutions, the number of times I have slept, the growth of beard on my chin. My throat is dry and from desperation I place my tongue on the damp wall, hoping for an osmosis of moisture. Occasionally the liquid arrives in my mouth; a vestige of rainfall that trickles like a tear down the wall's stone surface. My wrist, which hangs limp from the handcuffs, is scabbed and bloody. Another stigmata? My sleep is disturbed and my somnolent twisting has resulted in abrasions. In the background is the Doppler sound of trains. I loathe Doppler.

But now I crack me up. It cracks me up how much gravitas I have succumbed to. What happened to the comical me?

There I am—sitting in the dark, making shadow puppets with my hands, working on my suntan.

In a thousand years I shall vow to slay whoever opens the door, but in another thousand years I shall grant them three wishes.

## G

Beaucoup foreshadowing, for an oncoming train announced, by Doppler, that it was slowing before my door and was not passing, as had all the others. So attuned was I to the slightest sensation that I could hear the whirring motors, the beating hearts of those who sat inside. I heard the doors part, and the footsteps of three visitors on the gravel. God only knows what kind of human wreck would greet them. In my captivity I had spewed all manner of discharge in my orbit: vomit,



semen, blood, bile, albumen, ambergris, camphor. My borrowed clothes were soiled and shredded. I should blacken my eyes and uproot my hair to complete the imagery. But there was no time to worsen or improve my couture because the footsteps quickly approached my door, a key turned in the lock, and the door swung open. I looked away from the bleached rectangles that radiated from the doorway.

"What are your three wishes?" I asked.

"How did you enjoy your solitude, Bryan?" asked one of the three, who approached me while the other two remained at the door.

"The service was good, but I wouldn't recommend the cooking," I replied.

"I hope you used your time wisely. I thought a few weeks in solitary confinement would give you some clarity."

Clarity obviously meant a vacuity of bowels and urinary tract. But I said nothing. I was sure the wrong words would merely attenuate my confinement. I found a use for the duct tape—back over my mouth again.

My host signaled to one of the persons at the door, who (it turned out to be Crossbow) crossed the room and, with the aid of a torch, located a water valve in the opposite corner. Why couldn't they have chained me to that? He attached a hose to the water valve and trained it on me, so forceful was the flow that it knocked me off my feet and against the wall. The water felt good, but my flesh was raw and the spray soon began to sting. Then Crossbow turned off the hose, set it down, and walked back across the room to where I was chained. He unlocked my handcuffs. A burning sensation suffused my wrist and arm.

The light from the train wasn't blinding or anything, but it was disorienting. As they walked me out of the room, I pulled my shirt over my head for a screen. I must have been quite a spectacle to the train-going radicals—Homo detritus. Put me between a human and a chimp, and we would have formed our own evolutionary tree.

Step up, step up, they guided me into the train. We walked down the aisle of the first car, which was full of stunned-silent radicals, who betrayed their presence by shifting their weight or hissing oxygen through their lungs. My sense of hearing had intensified, almost as keen as my sense of humor, methought.

We stepped through two more doors, exiting this car and entering the car behind it. This car was empty save for us. When we came to a halt, Crossbow ordered me to sit, and I complied.

I removed my shirt, as it was soaked from my recent hosing.

"Get him a blanket," I heard.

The train was inching forward again. The third guy, not Crossbow and not the one who addressed me, walked in the direction of the forward car.

"Do you know who I am, Bryan?" the man asked.

"The only thing I know—and it's from guessing—is that you're a part of Earth Liberation," I explained.

"But do you know who *I* am?"

I studied his face to see if I recognized him. He wasn't the childhood playmate I had tied to the railroad track, I was relieved to note, for my then-playmate had been white; nor could I clock who else the man might be. I studied Crossbow's face too, but no joy. Then I looked back at my interrogator. He looked incredulous. So I thought again about who he might be. College prof? Oyster peddler? There seemed to be so many people who knew me whom I didn't know, as if someone had excised a high school yearbook's worth of memories from my head.

Blanket came, bringing bottled water as well. I tented myself in the blanket and removed the rest of my soiled clothes while my three captors conferred in a huddle. *Huddling's for pussies*, I thought. I could identify each whispered word but I didn't care any more. I twisted the water out of the clothes and spread them out on the seat behind me to dry. I wonder if the bathhouse boyo would want his clothes back now. Maybe I should send him a gift card instead.

I opened the bottled water and poured it into my throat. Blanket and Crossbow walked out of the car in opposite directions: Blanket to the front to join his fellow radicals, and Crossbow to the rear car to align the back of my head in the sights of his Crossbow 3000. My remaining captor occupied the bench that faced mine.

"So what's your name?" I asked. "Maybe I'll remember that."

"Lawrence Tribe," he replied, once again studying my reaction.

Nope, he wasn't the oyster peddler.

"Are you going to tell me why you brought me here?"

"We intercepted government communications," he said. "We heard that there was an attack on the Jesus lovers in the Central Valley. The Bureau of Worship trucked in a massive amount of firepower. It was unprecedented; usually there are only minor skirmishes between federal forces and the Jesus people, but this was enough firepower for an invasion. Then, all of a sudden, the invasion was called off, and instead, elite S&D troops were concentrated in downtown San Francisco."

"What's S&D?" I asked.

"Search and destroy. We know something extraordinary was going down because the Feds were depleting all their resources from the borders. It left many prime targets wide open for us."

"So what did you blow up then?"

"Nothing. I was more interested in finding who the subject of all this attention was. If the target is big enough to draw in so many government forces, then this is somebody I want to meet."

"So how did you know where to find me?"

"I suspected immediately it was you they were after. As I said, the Feds were too busy tracking you to cover their own backsides; we just watched the watchers. They picked up your phone transmission from Buckyball's."

"Yeah, I don't get how they cracked my encryption."

"They didn't. Didn't you notice that no one else was using a phone that morning? They announced a phone-out for San Francisco over the telly. Anyone caught using the phone was immediately suspected. That's how they knew where to find you, and we were right behind them."

Why hadn't I seen that? Crowded streets with busy professionals and not one using a phone!

"So why do the Feds want me badly enough to kill people?"

"First, you have to understand that killing civilians is a discretionary act of the government. The real question is why would they go to risk such *exposure* to capture you? Fag?"

"No thanks," I said.

He lit a cigarette, so I lowered the window beside me and took another swallow of bottled water.

"Okay, so why did the Feds want to risk the exposure to kill me?" I asked.

"Right," he said, puffing his fag sagaciously. "As I mentioned, it was the government's perseverance that put you on our radar. Or my radar, to be precise. Earth Liberation is interested in the government's movements for tactical reasons, but I had an ulterior motive. I merely borrowed EL resources so I could collect you. Let me ask you a question, Bryan. What do you know about the Society of the Second Chance?"

"I've never heard of it."

"I doubt that you would have. The order was founded at an affluent Jesuit school in upstate New York about thirty years ago. Those who formed this society were the scions of wealthy industrialists who wanted to stop the destruction of the planet and the exploitation of the proletariat. The idea was that as members grew to replace their parents at the head of their companies, they would turn vot-

ing control over to the influence of the society. The society would manage the company in a way that was harmonious with the environment and its workers.

“Over the course of a decade the society accumulated a great deal of wealth and power. I wasn’t much involved with the society after I left university, for I had followed a different vocation for a time. But my eldest brother died in a boating accident on the West Coast, and I became the chief executive of the largest rubber tire manufacturer in the country. The company owned vast rubber plantations in far-flung tropical regions, huge cargo ships, a multitude of plants and factories. The company had huge distributorships and financial entanglements with suppliers, vendors, and customers. At the annual shareholders’ meeting, I used my majority position to vote onto the board my colleagues in the Society of the Second Chance; then I put my shares in trust under an umbrella organization the Society controlled.

“As soon as the votes were counted, though, I found myself expelled from the Society. The board of directors used the company to corner the rubber market and drive down the price of rubber on the global market. Rubber was not their only corner; using a consortium of companies they also monopolized the demand for commodities like coffee and bananas, and minerals like copper, meniscus and cesium. Their practices depressed prices on the global market, resulting in economic devastation for the poor farmers and miners in the third world.

“Can you imagine my reaction, Bryan? I had been no small party to this ruin. My signature graced every document; my family’s name was on every ship. Peasants in the Chilean steppes were burning me in effigy. The French marched in the streets and blockaded railcars. In New Zealand, protesting Maoris occupied our factories for months.

“It was then that I contacted other dissident members of the Society. We agreed to form a new group, and it was our goal to destroy the Society and undo the devastation the Society had caused.”

“Earth Liberation?”

“Indeed,” Lawrence replied. “Our first goal was to get the Society’s attention, so we decided to blow up a tire warehouse my family had once owned, as a warning shot. One afternoon, one of the EL called the local police and reported a bomb threat near the warehouse. The police evacuated the area but could not find any bombs, despite a four-hour search. After the police left, we infiltrated the warehouse through a series of tunnels in the water system underground. We rigged explosives around the perimeter of the warehouse, and after securing our own escape, we detonated the explosives.

"Bryan, you would have been amazed at how the burning tires from the factory lit up the sky! You could see the spectacle for miles! It burned all night long, and the next day, and the night, and kept on burning for a week.

"Fire suppression teams were called in from all over the state. They tried dumping water on the burning tires, frosting the mound with chemicals, even dropping buckets of water from helicopters and fliers, but the fire would not extinguish.

"Scientists examined the blaze, and determined it would probably burn for *years*. Not weeks, not months, but *years*. For some reason, vulcanized rubber is the perfect fuel, and it cannot be extinguished because the heat percolates inside the mound and erupts volcano-like. Our first attempt at subversion led to a Dante-esque disaster that burned for more than eight years."

"Good thing it wasn't an oil refinery," I replied.

"We did blow up our share of oil refineries," he said. "In fact, the supply of petroleum became so unstable that it was one of the factors that led to the abandonment of fossil fuels for automobiles and electricity."

"But what's the point of blowing things up? Doesn't that cause more harm and environmental damage than the buildings and factories that were there to begin with? Look what happened with your tire warehouse. What about the jobs you destroyed?"

"You see, that kind of rationalization is precisely why we needed to blow things up. We needed to catch the attention of the apathetic, complacent public. Nobody cared about alternative fuels until our acts of sabotage sent the cost of gasoline to over one hundred dollars a gallon—and that was in pre-inflationary dollars! Nobody cared about the destruction caused by automobiles until we began blowing up bridges."

"Why did you blow President Reagan's face off Mount Rushmore?"

"For the hell of it. It's very hard to restrain a group of radicals like the EL. Everyone has their own agendas and ideologies. We are home to sports fishermen and vegetarians, socialists and anarchists. If you find two of us that agree on anything, it's that things must be blown up! So sometimes we choose a target to let everyone blow off steam."

He lit another fag, for he talked his last one down to ashes. "Want another water?" he asked. "I'll have some food sent down for you, too. I forget you've been in isolation for two weeks, even though I'm the one who put you there."

"Before you do that, Lawrence, I have a question for you."

Deep inhale, exciting the orange ball at the top of his cigarette. "What's that?"

“Let’s say you love someone, but you find that no matter how good your intentions, you keep on doing things wrong. And to make matters worse, you may have done horrible things in your past, but you don’t remember what they are.”

“Do you feel the need for a confession?” he asked, with a grin.

I thought for a tick. *I have nothing to confess. I have nothing to confess*, I said to myself. I *did* have nothing to confess. But I had this deep-rooted conviction that I had done something wrong. What was on my mind, of course, was Char. What if you were dating Jesus Christ’s sister, you know? She would be so pure, and generous and giving, and every time you saw her you would dread that you had done something on the way to her house that she would think was impure, not quite Christ-like, and you’d be out the door. Imagine going to bed at night, in love with a wonderful woman, and waking up the next morning with the spell broken; you were just another punter, no different than anyone else, un-charmed.

A fortnight without food or daylight was making me melodramatic, I thought.

I looked at Lawrence. “I have nothing to confess,” I said. “What I want to know is if you love someone, you marry her, right? That way, even if you’re on your deathbed, she has a paper that says the doctors must let her in to see you, and before you die she’s the last thing you see. But what if you have the same love and you didn’t marry her? You’d be on your deathbed and you’d know she couldn’t come to see you, and the last thing you’d see is a stranger. Who are you to her and who is she to you? You’re no better than strangers. If you and she were fished out of the water from the *Titanic*, they wouldn’t lay her down beside you because there is nothing that binds the two of you. You could fly off in opposite directions, through centrifugal force.”

“Are you missing someone?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t abduct her too, right?”

“I only have need of you,” he said, pointing at my chest with his cigarette butt.

“I’ll tell you what—just give me one last phone call before you strap me to the Space Station and blow me to bits.”

“Wish granted,” said Lawrence.

And I thought *I* was going to grant wishes.

## CHAPTER 6



# HOW TO CHEER UP A NIHILIST

A shower was all I needed. A long hot, steamy shower effaced weeks of detritus. As I shaved I eyed my face in the mirror, and it made me remember the eyes of the people in the coffee shop. I knew had to get back to Char, but I had to answer those immobile eyes first. Lawrence had his purposes for me, but I had my purposes for him. He had the people, the firepower, the surveillance, the mobility. Perhaps if he learned what he wanted from me, I could learn from him which party in the government was chasing me, and who had ordered the incursions into SF. *Quid pro quo*.

My borrowed boyo outfit was fit only for burning, but luckily the radicals brought me a nice, subversive wardrobe. I dressed and finished my ablutions; then walked out the door to what I hoped would be sustenance. It was funny how I could so easily adapt to cult abductions and solitary confinement, yet emerge only with a large appetite.

I stepped out of the Travel-Home freshly showered and coiffed. What an eye-ful! We were camped near the ridge of a vast chain of mountains, not jagged but undulating and sinusoidal, like the backside of a Titian. The downward slope of the mountain was covered with row after row of windmills. Some were conventional windmills, with a daisy-shaped fan at the top, but there were different ones—huge vertical eggbeaters, blades shaped like footballs, turbines shaped like

drills, Messerschmitt-style propellers...It was like a big science project to increase the rotation of Earth. A strong wind blew continually over the windmills, causing them to spin in all directions: clockwise, anticlockwise, up, down, forward, backward. I'd hate to be a bird in this part of the planet, I thought.

Since I was near the top of such a huge mountain, I thought I'd give telepathy another try, to see if I could ring up Julia. I tapped my forehead a few times, but no joy. Instead, I experimented with my newest gift, and listened to the whispers of conversation that wafted from the tents and Travel-Homes on the mountainside. I echo located Lawrence's voice, and began walking toward him.

Most of the conversation I overheard was quotidian, but when I walked past a tent or Travel-Home, and spotted the occupants sitting at table for dinner, I became the topic. Why was I here? Why had EL risked such exposure to abduct me? When people are talking about you, the best policy is to smile and wave; so I stepped down the sloping mountainside, gesturing like a beauty queen.

I attuned myself to Lawrence's conversation. I still could not see him but wove my way through the scattered encampments to find him.

"He hadn't cracked at all," said Lawrence.

"I'm totally surprised," a woman's replied. "That length of time in a black hole without food would turn me into a lunatic."

"When we first saw him, he looked like he'd been through someone's digestive system," added another voice—Crossbow's.

"Granted," said Lawrence, "but did you notice how he started shouting out jokes as soon as we walked in? Not only was he *coherent*, he was *witty*. He wasn't even close to cracking up."

"Then why didn't you leave him down there longer?" the woman asked.

"Because I didn't want him to crack up. I wanted to see how much he could take without breaking him. If I broke him, he'd be worthless to me. But if I took him to the edge, to the opint where he was on the verge of delusion, I'd learn something about his strengths. It's like trying to see how far you can swim. If you swim out too far, you won't be able to swim back and you drown."

I liked that—a swimming analogy.

"So you think I'm witty?" I asked him, when we were face-to-face.

Lawrence didn't act surprised that I had picked up their conversation. Instead, he arose to introduce me to everyone around his table. "Here's Gwen, she's a nihilist"—you could tell—"Kwami, a vegetarian; his wife, Shoshona, who is also a vegetarian and a Marxist; Kim eats meat and supports the rights of indigenous people; Erin is a hanger-on; Marta is passionate about the whales, and she is our only capitalist."



Aaah, Marta. Why are the capitalists always the pretty ones?

It would be impossible, I knew, to sort out each person's name, political leaning, dietary preference, and cause; besides, all the talk about food was charging my appetite. I don't know why they were so amazed that I could go weeks without food; starvation was *de rigueur* for a cosmopolitan such as I in order to maintain my hourglass figure. But now it was time to feast.

Why do cults always eat so well? There was food galore. But Lawrence seated me between two vegetarians, so in deference to them I concentrated on a steaming plate of vegetables and refrained from anything that once pumped blood.

"So what do nihilists do for fun?" I asked Gwen.

She glared at me through the whites of her eyes. "You are *so fake*."

"It must be tough being a nihilist when you're on your period," I observed, implying that her mood was a result of her physiology.

"Don't you think it's outrageous that the government won't let you breed, but they won't do a damn thing about your period?" she asked, having taken my observation seriously.

"At least they let us keep our genitals," I said.

I was about ready to slit my wrists to cheer her up when Marta interjected, "Gwen is just upset that you got to spend two weeks in the hole, and it wasn't she."

"Bitch!" said Gwen.

"Does everybody know about me?" I asked Marta.

"Of course. This is a very small community. Whenever fresh blood shows up, it gets everybody's attention."

"Does everyone else spend a few weeks in the hole?"

"No, you're the first! The rest of us come from friendly origins. We were recruited from college campuses, protest rallies, demonstrations. Gwen here was attracted to the stench of rotting flesh."

"Bitch!" said Gwen, for a second time.

"She really likes to be taunted," Marta whispered to me. "It makes her feel she's suffering as a nihilist."

"Are you suffering as a capitalist?" I asked.

"Capitalists don't suffer."

"They will," Shoshona interrupted. "You just haven't waited long enough."

Marta and I both laughed.

"Look at America today," Shoshona continued. "There are a few islands of so-called capitalism left, like the big cities: Las Vegas, San Francisco, Montreal. But the government taxes the producers in these cities and redistributes the

income to the big welfare capitals on the East Coast. Is that capitalism or socialism? It's socialism, of course, but the people in the big cities don't know it is because the government has deported all the beneficiaries."

"Anybody want that?" said Crossbow, pointing to a huge cut of beef.

"Most of the peripheral societies," she continued, "that have grown up around the 'official society'—like the religious groups, the Mormons and the Baptists, have reverted to agrarian production and follow this hybrid of nineteenth-century capitalism and socialism from the book of Deuteronomy or Leviticus or wherever.

"Our community has plenty. We have plenty of space, plenty of food, and plenty of power." She gestured with her hands to the ambient windmills. "But someday we won't have enough. We'll have plenty of people, but a scarcity of land, or food, or power. Then, watch out."

"Then we blow ourselves up," said Gwen.

"Then we blow ourselves up."

It was nice having a nihilist around to finish your sentences for you.

After dinner we cleared off plates, packed away food, and did other kitchen things. Then Marta and I strolled off for a walk. The rest of the camp was enjoying the cool of the evening, collecting themselves for games of soccer or volleyball, crossbow practice, or animated conversation lubricated by California grape.

"So what brought you here?" I asked her.

"I grew up in Santa Cruz, on the coast. I was a real surf-rat, you know. I'd surf before school started, and as soon as class was over I'd head back to the beach and surf until dark. My whole family surfed. We lived in a derelict old house near the cliffs; my mom and dad just made enough money to pay the rent and keep us in surf wax. We sold hippie things at flea markets; that's why Lawrence said I was a capitalist."

"So you have suffered for capitalism!"

"Right. Well, when you spend all of your time in the ocean, you develop this affinity for the things you swim with—dolphins, seals, even sharks—but once in a while you'd be blessed to see a huge island rolling around in the break with you, with thick paddles for fins and luminous eyes. You can't imagine how exhilarating it is to be perched on your surfboard, the sun baking your shoulders, and a huge whale is drifting alongside you.

"The summer before college though, was a catastrophe. After surfing all day, I'd come home to change and there would be a rash all over my body. I'd develop an eye infection and could never stop coughing. My dad started having lung problems. My brother got a you-know-what infection. Some researchers from

UC Santa Cruz checked out the water, and it turns out that effluent was pouring out of the septic system and into the streams and waterways. You know what effluent is, right?”

“It doesn’t mean you’re successful,” I replied.

“Right. It meant we were literally swimming in shite. Soon the city closed down the beaches and we had to travel up north, to Marin, to surf.

“But then the tide pools grew fetid; bacteria killed whole seal colonies. The bodies of seals and otters washed ashore. Even a mile away you couldn’t avoid the stench. One morning when I walked down to the beach to film the shoreline for my discussion board, I found a massive whale carcass lying in the sand. It was heart-wrenching. The whale was already putrefied, so I had to wrap my shirt over my mouth and nose just to be able to breathe. I filmed the whole thing, birds landing on top of it to feed, families with small children running away with their hands over their mouths and stomachs. In less than two hours the beach was covered with cameras.

“The city council developed all sorts of schemes to account for all the dead sea life: excessive plankton, shifting sea currents, even the lemming effect. I was incensed! When it was dark, my brother and I stole a pound of basalt from a construction site and buried it under the whale’s body. The next day the cameras were back, and the city council was spinning more science fiction about why the animals were dying: the influence of the moon on the tides, satellite television signals were interfering with the whale’s sonar, etc. We waited for them to start pontificating, and then my brother and I remote-detonated the basalt.”

“I don’t believe it!”

“You wouldn’t believe the riot. Gobstoppers were raining down from the sky, crashing onto car tops, burying people in stalagmites. They were running in every direction! They’d run one way and a huge whale bomb would fall in front of them, so they turned and ran that way, until another crater would land in that direction. My brother and I were absolutely cracking up!

“That’s how the police found us, of course. Then we were surrounded with cameras and I shouted, ‘Your toilets are killing the whales! Your toilets are killing the whales!’ It was quite a riot. I was taken off to jail you know, but at least I got my point across. A day later, a man came to bail me out of the Santa Cruz jail. It was Lawrence, incognito. He said he had never seen anyone blow something up with such aplomb.”

“Good for you,” I said. “It sounds like you’ve found your niche.”

“I haven’t been back to the coast since then. I keep on hoping for an assignment that will let me smell the salt in the air again.”

"Hey, which one is your favorite?" I asked, sweeping my hand in a semicircle to encompass the spinning windmills.

"I like the whirligig ones," she said. "They remind me of this little toy I had when I was younger. You know, you get a whirligig on a stick and run around fast enough to make it spin. Which one's your favorite?"

"That one," I said. "It looks like a floppy hat. I can't figure out how it spins at all."

"Jake designs these. He's brilliant. He used to be a mechanical engineer before he enjoyed us. Now he's our demolition man."

"Have you named all the windmills?"

"Not yet..."

So we sat on the side of the mountain naming windmills Turner and Spinster and Mary Go-round while the sun turned into a watercolor.

"Let's go back to my tent," Marta volunteered. "We can light a fire. I'm getting a wee bit cold."

"I've an errand I have to do first. Why don't I drop you off, and when I'm done I'll stop by to visit you."

"Okay," she agreed.

We walked through the windmills and scattered campfires until she stopped and identified her tent. It was hard to miss. There were whale and seal drawings painted on the canvas, and a surfboard was leaning against the front flap.

"I don't know how long I'll be gone," I said.

"Okay, if I fall asleep, just wake me up."

I walked away, listening intently for Lawrence's voice. There was no sound of him, so I tried listening for Crossbow instead. I steered toward the sound. It was funny that I wasn't being followed, or detained, or escorted the way the colonel and the Sister had done. Maybe Lawrence trusts me. Maybe he knows I have nowhere to run, I'm in the middle of nowhere. Maybe he knows that I won't run, because if I do, then people will end up dead again. But if I just stayed out of coffee shops, maybe that wouldn't be a problem...

Crossbow was with a group of guys and my nihilist, shooting their crossbows into these mechanical targets that tore off, helter-skelter, once you wound them up and released them. It was a pretty daring game because half the time the targets would charge back into the center of the group, and the person who was shooting would track the target with the tip of his crossbow and nearly scathe one of his fellow onlookers. Once in a while a target would freeze; then you could hear a coil release inside and the target would spring up into the air, about ten

feet. Half the fun was for the archer to try to shoot the target, but the other half was ducking and weaving so the archer wouldn't shoot you.

"Who you?" I was accosted.

"I'm Bryan. I'm a newbie." More secret handshakes. I was getting privy to quite a repertoire of them.

Crossbow shot off an arrow that completely missed the elusive target, and plunged into the twisting fan of a windmill. "Loss of point!" he was taunted.

"Where's Lawrence?" I asked.

"Ask Jake," said Crossbow. "He saw him last."

Jake was a large, avuncular guy who was holding the targets, winding them up, setting them loose when the archer was ready.

"Jake?" I said.

"Yup."

"Are you the Jake who designed the windmills?"

"Yup."

Then it dawned on me. "Are you 'genitals by Jake'?"

"Yup."

"Awesome! I've seen some of your handiwork," I said. For he was the Jake of the massive genital sculptures at Hoover Dam, the winged figures of the republic avec sex organs.

"Did you like 'em? It took me about four weeks to finish. I used castings."

"Well, they definitely left an impression."

"Let me show you something," said Jake. He put his arm on my shoulder and guided me away from the group. They immediately picked up the targets and you could hear things like "How do you wind this thing up? I think it's broken. Oh my God! It's got my finger!" Jake chuckled as we walked.

We walked for about five minutes and then Jake said, "Stop."

In front of us were dozens of miniature tourist attractions: the Hoover Dam, the Golden Gate Bridge, the castle at Disneyland, each with a distinctive impairment to mark where Jake's bombs had struck.

"Lawrence lets me get creative once in a while. I can't *just* destroy things. I was an engineer for too long. I have to create things as well."

"Well, thanks for the tour. Which place do you plan to blow up next?"

"Dunno. We haven't chosen our next target yet. But I'm getting the urge again so I hope we choose a target soon."

As we headed back to the game, we spotted three of Jake's targets lying immobile, pierced through the center with arrows. It was Gwen shooting. The last tar-

get was doing its evasive maneuvers as she let fly the arrow, which knocked it clear off the ground and sent it tumbling down the mountainside.

"Bitch!" the guys cried out, seeing that the game was over.

"Bitch!" Gwen replied, her stock epithet.

This caused the guys to erupt in another round of "Bitch!"

"Good shot, Gwen," I said, to divert her attention from the guys.

"I didn't mean to wreck them," she explained, vis-à-vis the targets. It was an obvious nihilist irony, but not a politic time to taunt her further.

"They're easy to fix," said Jake. "No worries." He trotted off to collect his defunct orbs.

Crossbow and the other guys walked off as well. Gwen sat on a stone jutting out of the grass, so I sat beside her.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to a figure tattooed on her shoulder.

"Shiva. He's a deity."

"You religious?"

"No, freak, he's the god of destruction."

"What does that mean, then?" I asked, pointing to the letters *G-I-T* beneath angry Shiva.

"*Government Is Tyranny*," she replied. "See this one?" she pulled aside her shoulder strap to expose a doughnut-shaped snake that was swallowing its own tail. With shoulder strap aside, I enjoyed a partial view of the nihilistic breast.

"What's that?" I said, pointing to another tattoo on the declension of her chest. "*P-O*—does that stand for 'pissed off'?"

"No, *P-O* is short for Paulette, my missus, freak," she replied.

"Really? Where is she?" For some reason I envisioned this huge Betty Rubble sneaking up behind me, ready to club me for chest-eyeing her woman.

"She's in a Correctional Center in Oakland. At least, I hope she is. I hope she hasn't been ground up into dog food for pissing off her guards."

"Well, when was the last time you saw her?"

"About a year ago. It was right after we pulled the Hoover Dam gig. The truck she was in ran out of hydrogen in the middle of the desert, and the Feds got her. Lawrence wouldn't turn around or let me go back for her because we were outnumbered, and the Feds were right behind us. But six months ago, we picked up some 'fugees on the Mormon Underground, and they had a note from her."

Once again I felt a comeuppance. I had been away from Char for no longer than two weeks and I was tearing up about it. Gwen has lost her girlfriend in combat, and now her missus was in a re-education camp. I had little to console her with. Maybe I should tell her about my theory of dating someone who looked

just like your old missus to get your mind off her; that was really all I had to offer. Do you hug a nihilist? I doubted it but I chanced my arm anyway, and cradled her gently; she didn't gnaw at my limbs or anything.

"Oh, here's her note," she said, pulling a tightly folded piece of paper out of her pocket and handing it to me.

Gwen baby—

Who'da thought I'd be the handball champ of the Oakland Correctional Center? I want you to know that I'm doing fine. They only flog us once a day and you can't imagine how much protein there is in fingernails! Just kidding. I am truly doing fine. I might be brainwashed the next time I see you, but that just means I can fall in love with you all over again. Stay alive and wait for me 'til it's all over...

Love

PO

"You got a girlfriend, freak?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Where's she?"

"It's not an issue of 'where's she?' but an issue of 'where am I?'. She's at home, and I'm far away and not likely to see her again."

"What's her name?"

"Char."

"*C-H-A-R*." She traced each letter with the tip of her finger on my chest. "That's what you need is a tattoo. C'mon, I've got the equipment in my tent."

"I'm not really a tattoo person," I demurred.

But she was already on her feet and pulling me up with her hand. "Don't be a pussy, freak," she admonished.

We walked to her tent, where she flicked on a light. Then she rummaged through her belongings for her tattoo equipment. In the spare moments I listened for Marta with my heightened senses. She had already fallen asleep, humming with a steady, sonorous breath.

"Shirt off," Gwen commanded. Off came my shirt.

"Do you want it to be loud or subtle?"

"I want it to have blinking lights and a circus clown."

"No."

"How about making it a little artsy?"

“Sure, freak.” She entered the letters onto the keypad and then shone them onto my chest, like a flashlight. Then she snapped a button, and a few seconds later, the letters began to form on my skin.

“Wait sixty secs,” she said.

“Why aren’t the letter upside-down?” I asked, regarding my pec. “I want to look down at my chest and read C-H-A-R, not R-A-H-C.”

“It’s not for *your* reading pleasure, it’s for *hers*.”

“Hey, if I flex my pecs, the letters magnify!” I exclaimed.

“So now you know have a new way to play with yourself.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“You can wash dishes for me tomorrow.”

“Deal. Okay, Gwen dear, I think I must off to bed.”

“Alright! Do my brekkie dishes for me, okay? They’re always the worst.”

I wished her good night and wandered through the encampment until I reached Marta’s tent. She was sleeping by a dispirited fire, so I added a few logs and curled beside her. The gentle brushstrokes of the windmills put me right to



## CHAPTER 7



# BOMB CRAZY

In the morning Marta gently chastened me for letting her fall asleep by herself beside the fire, so I ended up with her lunch dish duty as well. We breakfasted with Lawrence & Co. again. I sat between Gwen and Marta, neither of whom was happy that I had befriended the other. It was great for me because they weren't food purists and I got to eat whatever I wanted.

After breakfast, Lawrence, Shoshona, and Marta dashed off for some kind of planning council while Gwen went to crossbow practice. Everyone else seemed to have some scheduled activity they couldn't be late for, leaving Kwami the vegetarian, Erin the hanger-on, and me to clean the table and washes dishes. Obviously it paid to adopt some kind of dogma as soon as you arrived so you could avoid kitchen chores.

"Why are you a hanger-on?" I asked Erin.

"Well, when I first arrived here I was a socialist," she explained, although when she spoke she terminated her assertions with a question mark, so it was more like...*when I first arrived I was a socialist?* "...but then I started dating a guy who was an anarchist [anarchist?], so I became that. When we broke up, I couldn't make up my mind if I wanted to be a socialist or an anarchist, and there's nothing in the middle. So Lawrence said I was a hanger-on."

"I think it is wrong to eat animals," Kwami volunteered. Kwami didn't seem to speak English well but was trying to contribute to the exchange nonetheless. Because he was making such a sincere effort I decided to do him a favor and

cleaned off the meaty plates so he wouldn't have to and thereby offend his vegetarian sensibilities.

"What do you usually do throughout the day?" I asked.

"Sometimes I help with the cows [cows?]. Sometimes I..." She concentrated on the suds that rested on her arm, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"You what?"

"Sometimes I just sit and watch the windmills. The spin in all different directions, you know? It's like impossible to try watching them all at once!"

"I think we should form a hangers-on group," I suggested. "Then we could march off to our own meeting and leave the dishes for someone else."

"What would we study?" she asked.

"We'd study how to get out of work," I said. I was the worst possible utopian.

"Hey, we could..." and then her voice trailed off again. She gave full attention to the iridescent bubbles on her arm. I could tell the hangers-on club would be a real scream.

Being member number one though, I wandered off, leaving Erin to stare at her bubbles and Kwami to finish the cleaning.

I wandered back down the mountain to Jake's spot. I found him working on a miniature windmill village. He was shaking his head and rearranging the windmills like chess pieces.

"Hey, Bryan," he said.

"Good morning, Jake. What are you doing?"

"Working on airflow," he said. "It gets more complicated each time you add an additional windmill. Each windmill subtly influences the airflow, so you have to position them in a way to maximize circulation. You know, the butterfly effect. I wish we had computers out here; it would be so much easier to model the aerodynamics."

He stood up, picked up a pole, and swung it like golf club, sending one of the miniature windmills into the grass.

"What was wrong with that one?" I asked. I walked over to where it landed to pick it up.

"Never worked. I had an idea for a perfectly flat windmill that wouldn't deflect the wind at all, but it would never spin."

The windmill fan looked like a small circular saw blade, perfectly flat and round, with little teeth along the circumference. An ideal pocket tool for the apocalypse.

"Can I keep this?" I asked.

"Sure," Jake replied.

I put the windmill fan in my pocket. It was bound to be useful someday. I walked around the village of miniature landmarks; in the daylight I could see greater detail. *Jake must use these replicas to plan his demolitions*, I thought.

"Hey Jake, you've been to San Francisco, right?"

"For sure."

"Inside the city, right?"

"Yup."

"Have you ever seen the Palace of Fine Arts?"

"Yeah. I stopped to check it out the night we blew the up Golden Gate Bridge. It's gorgeous."

"Do you think you could build a replica for me?"

"I dunno. Let me check." He walked over to a large tool chest and fished a book out from inside. The cover read *1001 Must-See Sites in North America*. He opened the book to the last few pages where the index must have been, then paged forward. "How does this look?" he said, showing the page he had found. It was a beautiful picture of the palace, with a cascading fountain in the front and grand colonnades behind.

"Can you build a replica of it from this?" I asked.

"For sure. The blueprints are on the next page. It was built for an International Expo in 1915."

"Those were crazy times. Weren't there anarchists blowing up buildings then, too?"

"Well, anarchy is the antidote to government. As long as we have one, we need the other."

"Well philosophized," I said. "Can I scavenge parts for you, or do anything to pay you?"

"You can take my place washing dishes," he replied.

Obviously I would be at dish duty for a while.

Now that he had a project he wasn't interested in talking anymore, so I took the hint and wandered away.

So I sat on the mountainside amidst the spinning windmills. I closed my eyes, counted to ten, and opened them, hoping I would see someone to play with. Nada. I closed my eyes again, counted to ten and opened them. Nada. *I wish for Marta to appear...I wish for Marta to appear...* open my eyes and there's nothing but windmills, grass, and cattle.

I wonder why Lawrence was so sure I hadn't cracked up. What if I had? Ordinarily, cracking up meant you started acting like a raving lunatic, but what if all the world changed around you and became all lunatic and you stayed the same?

Whatever. If I were truly cracking up, I'd insist on a lot of perks. Once I had gotten some anesthesia for some tooth-work and as Char was driving me home we stopped at a restaurant for lunch. I pretended to be a drooling idiot, dropping dishes, using exaggerated stumbles to knock one person into another, like bowling pins, calling the waiter 'princess.' If I were to truly crack up I'd be a real menace, a poltergeist. You only get one shot at going crazy.

"Whatcha doen?" Marta asked, jarring me out of my reverie.

"I was commanding you to come see me," I said.

"But I was coming to see you anyway," she remonstrated.

"I only command people to do what they want to do anyway. I'm like the king in *The Little Prince*."

"Then I've got some suggestions for you to command me..." she said elliptically.

"Please!" I objected. "It's a children's book."

I thought about the two-footers that had beset me at the crèche in Fresno. Whatever had happened to the little girl and her gobstopper? What about Charlie's grandpa?

"You free?" Marta asked.

"For sure. Whatchawannadoo?"

"You like to swim?"

"Absolutely!" said I.

"C'mon then. We'll have the pool all to ourselves."

This prompted her to run straight up the side of the mountain, leaving me to run at her heels. Can you only run pell-mell down a mountain? Can you run pell-mell up? We left the camp far below us until our only company was the windmills and a few rarified cattle. We reached a spot where the pitch leveled off, and found a small pool carved out of the ground. One windmill was used to raise a bucket of water up the mountain from a stream down below. It wound through a series of ropes and pulleys and emptied into the pool. Another windmill powered a large paddle to stir the water for circulation, while a third spun a miniature water wheel. The only thing it lacked was a fourth windmill to wipe your bum.

"Water's warm," said Marta. She pointed to a large lens that focused the rays of the sun onto the water's surface. Otherwise, since it was fed by a stream, it would have been quite nippy.

She took off her shoes, her shirt, and pants and stood in her bra and panties. "Your turn," she said, so I stripped off my outerwear and with the cover of a pair of briefs dove into the water. The pool wasn't long enough to lane-swim, but at least I could practice two or three strokes before reaching the opposite side.

You could tell Marta had grown up a surf-rat. Her body was lean and muscular.

"Who's Char?" she asked, when she surfaced from her dive. She had read my newly etched tattoo.

"My girlfriend," I explained.

"You know, for the longest time I was crazy for Jake," she said, "but he's always so stand-offish, especially around me. I didn't know what I had to do to attract his attention. Finally I just gave up. So now I'm unattached."

She swam over to me and stood in the water in front of me, so we were face-to-face. "Hey, you still have room for *M-A-R-T-A* on this pec," she said.

As she traced the letters with her finger on my chest, I could feel the hair on my skin climb. Marta must have sensed my microscopic perturbations, for she reached behind my head, lifted herself up on her toes and pressed us into a kiss.

Pre-Char I was the last guy on the planet to say no to a woman. I used to have a dream that I was Jonathon Harker, stranded overnight in Dracula's castle, and beset by three female vampires. "Make love to us," they would plead, but I knew, with dream omniscience, that sex was just the prelude and once it was done they would feast on me. Nonetheless, each time the proposition was made in my dream, I would accept, despite the fact it would lead to my demise.

"Mmmm...tasty," I said to Marta. "Can't."

Marta looked at me eye-to-eye, and then slipped away from me, swimming to the opposite end of the pool. I thought she had a sulk coming on, but she kicked off the side and swam back to me. "That's what I thought you'd say," she said. "Thought I'd give it a try anyway."

But if you were a vampire in a castle in Eastern Europe...

"Not mad?" I asked.

"Nope. I like you even more now; you're a good person."

Actually, I was Jonathon Harker; I had to slay monsters and Mina was waiting for me.

We lay on the deck beside the pool, absorbing the sun. I lay on my back, and Marta lay with her head on my chest, so we formed a T.

"What's Char short for?" she asked.

"Charaloosalandra."

"What?"

"Pikcharey Vajpay."

"One more time..."

"Chari Scuro."

"Right. What's she like?"

Of course I had been thinking of Char non-stop since she left me many days ago, but now that I had to take the test I stammered. “Ummm, she’s like the World War II nurse that all the soldiers fall in love with. You know, always smiling; always sincere; never impatient.”

“That doesn’t sound like your type of girl. You seem more like a cynic.”

“I know. I perpetually have a problem with saying the wrong thing. I always seem to pick the topic that makes someone in the room cry, or makes someone else want to fight. I’m like a smartass savant.”

“Yeah, I saw evidence of that when you came to dinner last night.”

“What made you like Jake?”

“He is so brilliant. There’s nothing he can’t design or build. That’s really all he cares about, too. He’s not here for the whales or the environment; he just wants to design things. Even blowing things up is like a passion for him. I feel the same way about surfing.”

“I did a lot of surfing before. We should surf together some time.”

“I think it will be the end of the world before I get to surf again,” she said.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s like, if there’s one thing you love to do, it always seems like everything in the world is conspiring to stop you from doing it; obviously the world has to come to an end before you’ll ever get a chance to do it again.”

What was the thing I wanted to do most in the world?

“Do you think things will ever get back to normal?” she asked.

“I don’t think things have been normal for a long time,” I said.

“What’s normal like? Maybe we should just stick with what we have. Normal might only make it worse.”

“We’re getting too philosophical for me,” I warned.

“Are we giving you a headache? I think your girlfriend is right about you. I can’t wait to meet her; we’re going to have a heckuva long chat.”

“Bryan!” a voice interrupted. A shadow loomed over us, and I looked up to see the vast body of Jake bent over in a breathing paroxysm. “*Hee-hah hee-hah hee-hah*,” he panted.

“Did you run up here?” Marta asked.

“*Hah hah hah*—noh, whhy?” he aspirated. Once he recovered his breath, he began adjusting the water wheel beside the pool, mumbling about how it had gone out of adjustment.

“What’s up, Jake?” I said.

“Oh! I thought you might like to see the replica I made. I made a *lot* of progress.”

"Already?"

"I told you he's a genius," Marta added.

"Where is it? *Down?*" I asked.

"Of course. I put it next to the Golden Gate Bridge. Do you want to see it?"

"For sure. Do you want to see it, Marta?"

"Of course. Let's go look at it now."

We quickly dressed (though our underclothes were still damp) and followed Jake back down the mountain. Each footstep of his was heavier and faster than the one before. I don't think he was able to slow himself down. It reminded me of the epiphany in 'Dharma Bums' where the guy realizes that it's impossible to fall off a mountain. By the time we reached the bottom, I figured, he'd be as breathless as he was when he had reached the top.

"*Pah-huh pah-huh pah-huh*," said Jake, pointing to his miniature village. He had formed a mini-palace out of some type of clay. It was very detailed, even showing the Etruscan friezes on the arches. "It's only-huh-a mohdel," he explained, still in extremis.

Marta was clearly delighted. She approached it on all fours; then used her index and middle finger as to-scale puppets to stroll around the building. "This is just brilliant, Jake!" she exclaimed. "My parents took me here when I was really young. I told all my friends my parents had driven me to Europe! Can I make little people for it? Wouldn't you just love to miniaturize yourself?"

I couldn't imagine Marta with Jake. She was so lithe and animated, and he was so huge and ponderous that I should have offered to shag her to keep their anomalies apart. That's what a good person would do. Well, not really. "What's that bell?" I asked, for then a bell began to ring.

"Lunchtime," said Marta.

"Do we have to go?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have to meet with Lawrence," Marta explained.

I wasn't really inclined to eat anything mid-day, but I wanted to see Gwen again, plus my hangers-on club. Oh yeah—and I was on dish duty. Jake stayed with his replicas while Marta and I walked back to Lawrence's table.

"Hey, freak!" Gwen greeted me. "Wadyoo do all day?"

"I did metaphor, assonance, and then...symbolism," I said.

"You are definitely a freak. How's the—" she pointed to my half-day-old tattoo and then lifted my shirt so she could check for herself. Once a woman gives you a tattoo, it seems she has carte blanche to your entire body.

"Wadyoo do?" I asked.

"First I went to crossbow training, then martial arts class, and then I taught a seminar on existentialism. Hey, do you want to do one-on-one training with me after lunch?"

"What's that?"

"It's a strength-building exercise. I love it. Don't eat too much for lunch then because you'll regret it."

I stacked a few pieces of fruit on my plate and grabbed a bottled water.

"Bitch. Bitch," Gwen and Marta greeted each other. The hostility was muted, so maybe they were warming up to each other.

"Did Marta talk to you about our problem?" asked Shoshona from the vegetarian side of the table.

"Don't think so," I replied.

"My bad," said Marta. "I was supposed to ask you if you'd seen any landmarks on your travels that haven't been...blown up already."

"You see, we're in the awkward position of having blown up all the buildings and other attractions in the area," Shoshona added. "Needless to say, they're not building any more of them. Now we have more causes than targets."

"What's the cause du jour?" I asked.

"The cities of Oakland and San Francisco have been piling their refuse onto barges and sailing their trash down the coast, where we've watched them dump the trash into the ocean. You can imagine how this harms the sea life."

"You know, you've already left your mark on everything I've seen. The Hoover Dam, the capitol building of North California, the Golden Gate Bridge..."

"Oh!" Marta interjected. "What about the Palace?"

"The Palace?"

"The Palace of Fine Arts."

"You don't want to blow up the Palace of Fine Arts!" I objected. "Can't we just blow up a Buckyball's?"

"Do you mean the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco?" Shoshona inquired. "That's perfect. I wonder why we hadn't thought of it before!"

"What about your trip there as a child?" I pleaded with Marta. "What about all your memories?"

"Well, if I love the place, then you know that others love it as well. That means it will really get their attention!"

I couldn't believe what I had done. I was truly a menace.

"Jake already has the blueprints," Marta continued. "He's already created a mock-up. We can start planning right after lunch."



I was an *eejit*. Despite the fact that I could overhear everyone's conversations at will, I had forgotten that this was a group of radicals and their *raison d'être* was to blow things up. All during dish duty I brooded on what I had caused.

Erin was going on about this lonely guy named Sartra? she had heard about, so I suggested she put together a picnic lunch to take to him, which absorbed all her attention and let me finish the dishes unperturbed.

Après dishes, I found Gwen waiting for me in the exercise yard with about two-dozen others.

"Okay, what's one-on-one training?" I asked again.

Just then a woman walked by with a whistle wrapped around her neck and a bag of ropes in her hands. "It's an exercise to build endurance!" she shouted. "It makes you tough!" She talked in perpetual exclamation.

She walked up to Gwen and me, had us face each other, and then bound my right hand to Gwen's left, and my left hand to Gwen's right. She did the same with our feet. When the rest of the group as also encumbered, she stood in the center of the group and yelled, "Ready?!"

Everyone else, including Gwen, yelled "Ready!" As I realized there would be no further instructions, Trainer Lady blew her whistle and immediately, Gwen twisted my arms behind my back, "Hey, that hurts!" I objected.

"Work it, people, work it!" Trainer Lady cheered. Then Gwen spread-eagled my legs and was about to raise her knee into my groin when I strained my legs to resist her. So she used my own hands to box my ears, and during my brief moment of surprise *bam!* She hammered me in the groin with her knee. Then it dawned on me that I was supposed to resist her, match her move for move, so I pulled my hands and hers down to waist-level while she applied opposite force. Each time I pulled my arm in one direction, she pushed hers in the opposite, like a perfect isometric machine. I could feel the fibers of my muscles strain like a fishing line. We fell onto the ground and tumbled over each other. I was on top of her for a while, but then she flipped me over and took the daylight side. Trainer Lady poured water over us, which helped cool me down but left the ground muddy and furrowed. At one point I had almost succeeded in getting behind Gwen, but she snapped us back into place. Each time I tried to relax or slow down she redoubled her efforts, and when she relaxed I redoubled mine. All the while Trainer Lady yelled "Look busy, you pussies!" After a while there was no sensation in my muscles. I was pushing strings. Trainer Lady blew her whistle again and I heard her voice exclaim, "Stop, stop, stop!" I couldn't tell if I had stopped or not.

"Game over, game over, game over," Gwen repeated.

All I could say in response was, “Oh my G—” in exasperation, but as I collapsed she kneed me again in the groin. “hod,” I aspirated, as if the air were drained from me.

“On your feet, pussies!” barked Training Lady. There was no way Gwen and I could stand up without each other’s help, so we were forced to cooperate in order to get up on our legs. It was a good idea because by cooperating it made sure we didn’t have any lingering hostilities toward each other. Plus, Gwen had no groin for me to retaliate against. My knees were shaking and I had to lean against Gwen to stand upright, while she leaned against me for the same reason.

“Mud time!” shouted Trainer Lady.

What further indignity was this? I wondered. I was too exhausted to move, and being lashed to another human it was unthinkable anyway.

While we were recovering, Trainer Lady opened a slough and trained a flow of water into the mud-pit.

“Untie, untie,” Gwen urged.

Using first my left hand and her right, we undid the rope on the opposite hands. I leaned over to free our feet and *bam!* she pushed me into the viscous puddle. She was not a nihilist you could turn your back on. Still tied to her feet I pulled her into the mud on top of me. This evidently was what mudding was all about; it was like sharing a womb with a bunch of strangers. We writhed around for a while, trying to coat as much mud as possible on the next person while avoiding the same fate, and after our second spell of exhaustion collapsed in the mud and basked like farm animals. As the sun baked the mud, you could feel it encase you tighter than a glove, a balm for aching muscles and weary brains. Was this nepenthe? Who would have thought that Poe was a mudder?

\* \* \* \*

I am standing on a small planet. The planet is small enough that you could circle it on foot in less than five minutes. *Where does it get its gravity?* Ahead of me I see a man’s back. He is walking away from me even as I approach him from behind. While we walk, the planet rotates so it is impossible to detect if any of us—planet, man, or I—is gaining on the other. But as I step forward, the ground becomes porous and my legs are absorbed until I am immersed to my knees. I try to move forward, but I fight the drag of the planet. Now the man has outpaced me. He has advanced to the far side of the planet, beyond its minuscule horizon, and I know soon he will be walking behind me. I am unable to free myself.

\* \* \* \*

“Wake up, freak!” Gwen shook me by the shoulder. I had fallen asleep, as you tend to do in a womb. I looked around the mud-pit, where the others had left human impressions behind them, as if their bodies had flown out of their graves. Gwen helped pull me out of the mud by my arm. She was completely coated with mud, even her hair and face. I was surely no better. “How much do you think you weigh with all that mud on you?” she asked.

“Please tell me there’s a shower here,” I begged.

“You’re in luck!” she said. We walked arm in arm to the lavatory, where there was already evidence the others had been before us. Even under a full jet of water the mud would not wash out, so Gwen and I took turns scrubbing each other with a large brush. We grabbed towels to wrap around ourselves, and then sat outside in the sun, air-drying.

“So how did you meet PO?” I asked.

“At university. I was giving a lecture called *The Search for Self-Abnegation in American Literature*. You can imagine what a cheerless crowd this attracted, me included. When I got up on stage to start my speech, I looked out into the audience as you do and saw a woman wearing the most radiant smile amid the stern faces. I couldn’t help myself; I felt a smile spread from ear-to-ear on my face as well. I looked down at the lectern for my notes and managed to regain my composure. I launched into my speech, but my eyes eventually drifted back to her enigmatic smile and I lost my focus. What was I talking about? During the break, I looked for her. I had to know what was making her smile, you know? But when I asked her, she said, ‘I smiled because *you* were smiling.’”

“So you think the moment you two saw each other you both spontaneously smiled?”

“Absolutely. There was no other reason to smile.”

“So the lesson is, if you want to meet a woman, be the only happy person in a room full of angry people.”

“Sure, freak.”

“So how did the two of you end up at Earth Liberation?”

“At university I began teaching a course on nihilism—”

“How do you teach a nihilist?” I asked.

“I wasn’t training nihilists, freak. I was teaching about nihilism in literature. And there’s a lot to teach about nihilism. For example, do you know the difference between nihilism and anarchism?”

"The secret handshake?"

"Both philosophies reject all forms of authority, but anarchism strives to replace government organs with a strong community, while nihilism rejects even the community."

"I don't know," I countered. "That's like saying there's a difference between someone hitting you with a bat or a two-by-four."

"Well, in academia you relish these subtleties. Look at all this bullocks about the difference between noumena and phenomena. Sometimes you make things up just to get more lecture hours. Anyway, as you can imagine, the censors weren't too keen on the nuances of each philosophy, so I received some special attention." She made an electrical sound and convulsed for a few seconds.

"More suffering for nihilism."

"Right. We got back at them, though. PO and I started holding demonstrations and rallies against government oppression. I was in charge of the agitprop. I went from being a nihilist on paper to a nihilist full stop. I was a nihilista."

"We drew in more and more students and faculty, and shut down many of the classes. We took over the library, the student union, even the Druidic Mythology department. That's when the Feds moved in. Homeland Defense forces surrounded the campus and demanded we surrender. You know what that means, right?" She pantomimed more electricity and convulsions.

"So what did you do?"

"For almost a week we held them at bay. Then they turned off the water and electricity and sent in the dogs. The dogs were vicious; they attacked anyone they saw, and if there was no human around they attacked each other. Then the Feds started lobbing canisters of brain gas onto the campus. Have you ever been around when a brain gas canister explodes?" More pantomimes. "We knew that next they would send in the troops. PO and I got everyone together to pass out the joy juice when someone started yelling 'Fliers! Fliers!'"

"Fliers?"

"For sure. But these weren't the kind of flier that I had seen before. There were corkscrews, and whirly-gigs, and ones that looked like merry-go-rounds."

"Fliers by Jake?"

"Absolutely! Homeland Defense forces shot some of the fliers down but most were able to land on the campus. Then Lawrence found us and offered to fly us all away! It was unbelievable. He took the students wherever they wanted to go, and brought the rest of us back here."

"Do you think things will ever go back to normal?" I asked.

"What's normal? Is normal a government that feeds off its people? Is normal a population that gives up its rights for cheap hydrogen and football? I like it the way it is now; it's closer to chaos, which is true freedom."

"Now you're depressing me."

"Good! When I first saw you yesterday, you had this huge smile on your face, like the first time I saw PO. I thought, 'What right has he to be happy when the world is so miserable?' You see, I thought your happiness was based on some superior joy you felt; but now I've realized it's based on the fact that you're oblivious to how bad things are." She must have seen me look crestfallen at her words, for she added, "Don't take it so hard, freak. Trust me; you've cheered me up more than I've depressed you. Today at crossbow practice, in fact, the instructor said that I wasn't being a 'total bitch,' which is a marked improvement."

"Wait," I interrupted. "I have to leave. They're doing it all wrong."

"What do you mean? I didn't piss you off, did I?" she asked.

"What? No, of course not. It's just that Lawrence is planning the attack on the Palace of Fine Arts all wrong. I just know it. I've got to go tell him."

She looked incredulous, but I was getting used to that. "Where can I get some clothes?" I asked.

"We've got a community closet where we can get dressed. It's not the height of fashion, though."

"That's okay. It's been a while since I've seen the height of fashion. Show me where."

We found the community closet and quickly helped each other dress.

"I'll see you soon. I've got to talk to Lawrence right away," I explained. Off I ran. I barged into Lawrence's tent and quickly ducked as Crossbow shot an arrow at me.

"Stop!" Lawrence ordered him; Crossbow pulled his finger away from the crossbow trigger, reluctantly.

"You're planning it all wrong!" I exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" said Lawrence.

"You're planning to blow up the Palace dressed as suits, right? Suits and skirts. It won't work; the Feds'll see right through you."

"Why?" asked Marta.

"Because no suits go down to the Palace anymore. It's a complete ghetto. The only people who hang out there are the homeless. I was there, remember?"

"How did you know we were planning this?" Crossbow demanded.

"The other thing is, the place is crawling with homeless, sleeping under bushes and behind Dumpsters. If you blow the Palace without clearing them out, you'll kill them all."

"Do you have a suggestion, then?" asked Shoshona.

"Yes," I said. "I don't want you to blow up the place, but since I can't stop you I want to make sure no one gets hurt. I have the perfect cover for you."

"Which is...?"

"Every few weeks the Seedy See, I mean the CDC, drives around in vans to round the homeless people up. As soon as they see the vans, the homeless flee because they're afraid they'll be infected. So we go as CDC workers, right? We don't attract any attention and we're guaranteed to empty the place."

"That's brilliant!" Lawrence exclaimed. "What do you think, Shoshona?"

"Bryan's right. We would have exposed ourselves if we had dressed as businessmen," said Shoshona.

"That is brilliant," Marta agreed. "But how did you know about our other plans? How did you know we were planning to dress as suits?"

"Inference, I guess," said I. Then, to change the subject—"Marta, you should bring your surfboard!"

## CHAPTER 8

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# PROVING I LOVE HER BY HOW MANY WOMEN I RESIST

It was only a small detail, about twenty of us, that boarded the train back to San Francisco. This time I was one of the group who laughed, sang, smoked, half-shagged, slept, played poker, played chess, drew on each other, and braided each other's dreads. I sat with Gwen and Marta; Jake sat near us, packing basalt cylinders. Lawrence was in the forward car, with Crossbow. When Marta leaned against my shoulder to nap, I gently placed her head on Gwen's instead; then I arose and walked forward, through the double doors.

"Bryan!" Lawrence greeted me. "I wondered when you would come visit me." He signaled to Crossbow to leave the car. As he left, Lawrence continued, "Come sit with me, Bryan."

Once again I sat on the bench opposite him. "What's on your mind?" he said.

"There's one thing I want to know, and I think you might be able to help me," I said.

"What's that?"

"I want to know who ordered those people killed at Buckyball's in San Francisco."

"You're partially right. I have a suspicion. But I can't tell you that without telling you more than I think you should know."

"I'll trade. You tell me who it is, and I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Let me tell you a story instead, Bryan."

I didn't object, so he proceeded.

"Imagine there are two men on a train..."

This was not difficult to suppose, as we were, *prima facie*, two men on a train.

"The men are seated across from each other in a dining car," he continued. "Though they are strangers, they intermittently exchange pleasantries of a banal nature. How was traffic? Were you pelted by the rainfall? As they dine, a functionary enters the room and asks to speak to one of the men in *camera*. The man leaves, but when he returns to the dining car, his expression is morose. The table is cleared for coffee, and another functionary enters the room and requests a similar audience with the other man. He also returns to his seat with an air of detached gravitas. As the coffee is served, however, they resume their congenial exchange. They are both civil administrators, it turns out; they both live in the same municipality, in the tree-lined suburbs; they both have young daughters.

"With the narrator's omniscience, you and I know that the men share other matters in common. One man is chief of the corps of engineers, and has just ordered his corps to rupture a levee to save the downstream city from certain flooding. However, the swollen rain water will rush through the breach in the levee and drown those who live nearby, including the other man's family. The other man is the health minister, and has just ordered a state of quarantine in order to sequester an outbreak of the plague. The quarantine condemns the residents to unavoidable contagion, and the other man's family is trapped behind the cordon sanitaire.

"It is only a matter of time before a casual allusion, or a shrewd inference will set these men at each other's throats; yet for the time being their conversation plods from one inane topic to the next."

"Not a bedtime story," I said.

"No, but it has a parallel. You and I are like the two men on the train; we don't know what the other has done yet. The more we speak to each other, the more likely it is that one of us will divulge something that exposes a crime or a tragedy."

"I get your point," I said. "I suspect your goal is to learn about me, without disclosing anything about yourself."

"Precisely."



"And yet, if your questions are too pointed, then I will learn something about you from them. So you have to be deliberately abstruse."

"Again—precisely."

"Is it really worth all this effort? I think you must have graver things on your mind."

"Bryan, the most important thing to me is my mission. Were it not for my mission, corporations would continue to abuse the planet; the government would continue to act as the arm of the corporations; and the people would continue to close their eyes and ignore how their food is produced and their toilets are flushed. I bring consequence back into the equation; quid pro quo—you destroy a habitat, I destroy a beautiful statue. Further, I have become home to people whom society has decided to crush because of their beliefs or behaviors. Were it not for our community, these people would be subject to arrest and re-education."

"But my mission rests with me. I have no successor. I have lieutenants across the country, but none so far has risen to leadership. So for now, my mission and I are the same. I must continue to serve my mission until another generation has coalesced."

"To answer your question, Bryan, to me, there is no graver thing to contemplate than this..."

He took advantage of the ellipsis to light a cigarette. "What is your mission, Bryan?"

"My mission is to get back to the way my life was before I became involved in all this," I replied.

"Yet three of your five friends are on the run, are they not? And everyone around you ends up dead. How can you go back to that life? It seems to have vanished."

"True."

"Nor are you unchanged. You have seen firsthand how your government treats those whom it opposes. You have learned of people with beliefs and passions they would die for. Do you think you could truly return to a lifestyle where your only passion is for the weekend soccer game? Do you think you could tolerate social complacency when you know that people are embattled for their beliefs; that the planet is being destroyed to satisfy the needs of the middle class?"

"You're right," I said. "I can't go back to the way things were back then. The world has changed and I have changed."

"So now it's you with graver things to think about. You and I will talk again. Right now though, I need to discuss logistics with Jake. Can you send him back here for me?" said Lawrence.

"For sure," I said.

As I walked through the train, I realized I had believed in a fiction to explain why others were chasing me. No one as astute as the colonel and the Sister, or Lawrence Tribe, would waste time with such delusory intrigues in order to woo a simple cryptographer. If they had wanted a message cracked or secret deciphered, it would be much easier to make me a proposition, rather than fabricate such an elaborate ruse as this. What was the point?

Although I knew it was a fiction, I had no better theory to replace it with; and so, like an animist, I held fast to my simple theory.

\* \* \* \*

Marta and I were to reconnoiter the ocean, so when we got to the shore with our surfboards, we stripped down and strode into the icy water.

"I wish Jake knew how to make a wetsuit," I complained.

Jake had augmented the bottom of my board with an assortment of fins and propellers, but he hadn't designed any outerwear to shield us against the cold ocean water and fog. Nonetheless, we paddled out past the break and sat on our boards, eyeing the horizon.

"The surf in Santa Cruz is much better," Marta bragged.

"Is that with or without the effluent in the water?" I teased.

Marta rode the first wave in the set, but I thought the second was larger and waited until it arrived, but it broke too soon. Instead, the third wave was propitious so I turned the board around, lay flat and started spooning my way toward shore. When the wave lifted me, I jumped up on my feet and had a good ride. It didn't form right for a tube, but I could still ride it before it crashed into white-water and I had to pull out.

We surfed for perhaps forty-five minutes; then I could feel my skin tightening around my head and I knew it was time to get out lest hypothermia set in. Once again, there was a trashcan fire nearby right when we needed one. A couple of other surfers were warming themselves before going into the water. Marta and I impressed them with our bravado, going into the water without wetsuits, and they admired the equipment on the bottom of my board.

"Later, boys!" said Marta, all affirt, as we carried our boards and walked back up the beach.

"See, it wasn't the end of the world and you got a chance to surf," I said.

"Well, we don't know if it's the end of the world or not yet," she corrected. "It's still morning, and we haven't even blown anything up yet."

Just then a Seedy See van drove down the road. It stopped before us, and Jake opened the door for Marta and me to climb in.

"Oh no, the Eubola!" I joked.

We stowed the surfboards; then Jake drove up and down the Marina district so we could scare away the germ-phobic homeless. We parked the van on the road adjacent to the Palace of Fine Arts and got out, searching for the homeless on foot. Our group had commandeered two other vans, and they soon arrived and parked beside ours. We made doubly sure there were no lingerers.

We carried the basalt cylinders to the Palace. Jake and Crossbow pressed balls of clay against the cylinders, and then pressed them into strategic spots on the arched buildings, as Jake's drawings indicated. Then we all returned to the Seedy See vans, except for Crossbow, whose job it was to detonate the basalt. We parked several blocks away, in the bathhouse district.

When the blast came, it roared through my ears with such force I could almost feel my head implode. I was deafened for a minute, and when a plume of smoke, dust and debris curled above the Palace, it was eerily serene. Then Crossbow arrived on a skateboard. He got inside the Seedy See van and we drove away. I gnawed the air, trying to equalize the pressures in my head; the excited voices around me were muted by a dull ocean surf, and for a time it was a question which sound would prevail. Finally, the surf receded and my hearing returned; but the hypersensitivity that I had acquired during my stay in the hole was gone.

Once we changed and returned the vans to the Seedy See parking garage, we dispersed to avoid attracting attention. Our plan was to meet at the Underground in an hour so we could take the EL train back to the windmills. Marta, Gwen, and I walked together; Marta and I carried our surfboards over our shoulders.

As we passed a Mack's, Marta exclaimed "Oh my God! You wouldn't tell anyone if I went inside and ordered something, would you?"

"I don't care," said Gwen. "What's the big deal?"

"You don't like Mack's?" Marta asked.

"Sure I do, but—" Gwen began.

"Then come inside with me. We'll order together!"

"I'll wait here with the boards," I volunteered.

While they went inside the restaurant, I walked into a small store nearby, and bought a postcard and a pen. Then I sat on the floor, with my back against the wall, and wrote a note to Char. I used minuscule type so it wouldn't be detectable by the U.S. postal service scanners. Char would have to use a magnifying glass to read it, but she was used to that.

Have I told you I love you today? Have I told you how wonderful you are? Have I run my fingers through your hair, have I touched my fingertips to your face, have I held you close to my chest?

Have I told you how you make me feel? That you make me laugh out loud with happiness, that you make me feel at peace, you give me a sense of worth?

Have we walked along the beach hand in hand today? Have we written "I love you" notes to each other, or called each other to say "I miss you. When are you coming home?"

Have you told me how God put us together; how we were meant for each other, how we are inseparable?

Have we told each other "I love you" at the same precise moment, your words overlapping mine...

Have we wrapped our arms around each other while the world spun around us, mindless of time, mindless of place, mindless of all but one boy and one girl and one timeless moment?

If not, then today has never been.

I asked the proprietor to post it for me, giving him extra Earth Liberation money, so I wouldn't have to press my own thumbprint on it. Then out again.

Bloody hell, the boards were missing. How long had I been away from my post? I hadn't been gone that long, I knew. Perhaps Gwen and Marta had taken the boards with them inside Mack's. I walked inside the restaurant to find them.

There was the usual clientele, Third-Worlders, skateboarders, even a couple suits, but no sign of Marta and Gwen. What about the uniloo? I opened the door and poked my head inside to look, but still no sign. Atop the urinals though, you could see monitors at eye-level flashing the news of the day from different cities, like LA or SF. Here was a chance for me to get some news about Tijuana without having to steal a phone to look it up, inviting the Federal death squads again. I parked myself in front of a urinal, then waited until the headlines from Tijuana flashed on the screen. MAN SOUGHT FOR AIDING DISSIDENTS, the headline read.

Federal investigators are searching for Mark Woo, a Tijuana resident accused of harboring dissidents during the Fairness Riots five years ago. According to authorities, Woo is believed to have fled the city and his current whereabouts are unknown.

The Fairness Riots plunged the city into weeks of chaos and violence as poor residents protested their forced resettlement to make way for new residential housing and commercial development, which heralded the city's revival as a key urban magnet. Hundreds of protestors were shot or arrested by police in an effort to quell the riots.

Woo is believed to be a member of the notorious Freedom Train, an underground movement that spirited protestors out of the city to escape arrest by authorities. Now Woo is himself a fugitive.

At the bottom of the story was a picture of Mark, as well as a picture of a dozen people confronting police in riot gear. *OMG, I hope he's okay*, I thought. I couldn't imagine that Mark was on the run now, too. What about Char? Would she be next?

I had no idea Mark was part of the Freedom Train. Good on him. *Get legs, man!* I thought. But Lawrence's point was making itself; the life I wanted to return to was not the life I had left. Where had my friends fled? Were they okay? Could I help them?

Back to the problem du jour. I double-checked the stalls, but no Gwen or Marta; I walked through the restaurant, and onto the sidewalk. No, no, no. Where could they have gone? I doubted the Feds could have picked them up for one simple reason; it would have been pretty inexplicable for the Feds to have taken the surfboards, too. Maybe Gwen and Marta had already headed back to the rendezvous point, thinking I had gone ahead of them. Or maybe they thought I had pulled a runner, not knowing I was inextricably tied to Lawrence until my own mystery was solved. So the best policy was to head to the Underground, where we were all supposed to rendezvous, in search of Gwen and Marta.

Now as I walked through the streets I overheard conversations about the explosion in the Marina District. I wouldn't have imagined the blow-up had merited this much attention since every day there were riots, bombings, and tanks in the streets to compete for everyone's attention. Then it dawned on me that I had become a part of the chaos and fear mongering that you read about. Hadn't I just blown up one of the 1,001 Must-See Sites in North America? In fact, it had been my scheme that made the venture so successful. They were going to blow it up anyway, I just made sure that no one was hurt, I rationalized; but had I tried to prevent it? No, I'd gone surfing instead. Had I really wanted to stop the bombing I could have prevented it in a number of ways. I could have run down the street shouting, "They're blowing up the Palace!" Or strapped myself to the arches to stop them. Would that have stopped them, or was Crossbow watching me, his hand poised over his weaponry? I didn't know. There was enough reasonable doubt for jurisprudence, but in my heart I knew I was guilty. Well, at least now I had something to confess.

As I walked toward the Financial District the number of people on the street and sidewalk increased until it was so packed in you couldn't stop or turn aside without striking someone else. Arteries of people were forming, streaming into the revolving doors of one building or the next. It must have been the 8 A.M. melee. It was so cramped I couldn't pull myself out of the rush, and instead was pushed in through the revolving doors of a building, the human eggbeaters. Peo-

ple were diving headfirst through the doors, or tossing their briefcases in and lunging afterward, just to beat the eight-o'clock tick. Then we moved en masse through the lobby, and parked in front of the mass-production elevators. *Tling!* A sonorous bell chimed the arrival of each car. *Tling! Tling! Tling!* Then, in Pavlovian meter we shuffled forward, twenty or so at a time, and jammed into the waiting car.

"Who you think done it?" was the question everyone was asking. "Who blew up the Palace of Fine Arts?"

"I'll bet it as those damned anti-abortionists," said one man.

"No," a woman objected. "I read that a group of devil-worshippers performed ritual sacrifices there, like it's Stonehenge. They probably blew it up to destroy the evidence."

"Well, I heard it was the Hairdressers Guild," volunteered another.

"Weren't they responsible for the explosion at the Hat-Makers Union Hall last Tuesday? Surely they wouldn't do two bombings in one week."

"Do you think it was the Young Republicans?"

"It was EL," said I.

"The Electrician's Local? Égalité et Liberté?"

"No, Earth Liberation."

"Nothing but anarchists," a man muttered. "Bedwetters and anarchists."

Every few floors the elevator chimed *Tling!* The door slid open and we disgorged one or two more suits. The higher we climbed, the more rarified the crowd became. Once it was empty I would ride it back down to the bottom and continue searching for Gwen and Marta, I figured.

A very large, lugubrious woman was going to thwart my plans, I could see. She monopolized the far corner of the car and far from leaving she concentrated on applying makeup with the aid of a mirror, and while the car lurched and shook she girded herself with two thick stumps and a pair of buttocks wedged firmly in the right angles of the elevator walls. Finally it was just she and I in the car, as all the others had been disgorged. *Tling!* The elevator chimed—top floor. It was so mechanically cheerful that I felt like smashing it in its electronic head.

We both walked out into the penthouse lobby. Time to find a uniloo so I could hide for a while and then sneak back down the elevator. No joy—in the lobby was a frenetic hand-shaker who tugged on mine as if he expected each pull to produce milk. My elevator companion received identical treatment; then we were ushered into the boardroom and shown a vacant seat.

My beachwear was obviously incongruous to the skirts and suits of those around me, so I said, "I'm from the Santa Cruz office," to assuage their curiosi-

ties. A business breakfast was spread on the table: pastries, fruit, coffee, punch. Lift pastry to mouth, insert therein, bite, and chew. Raise coffee to lips, tentatively sip, and swallow. Repeat step one.

As we feasted, a door opened at the rear of the room and in stepped an oleaginous man whose face was portrayed in cameo on the wall behind him.

"Good morning, Mr. Craft!" we said in unison. He gave us his good morning, thanks for coming speech. Then as he took his chair, he espied me in my odd attire and said, "...and you are?"

"Santa Cruz!" the room replied for me, again in unison.

"Welcome, Santa Cruz," he greeted me.

"Good morning, sir," I meekly replied. He set his legs on the tabletop, crossed his feet over each other, and made a tepee with his hands, which he placed on his chest.

"Do you like your paycheck, Santa Cruz?" he asked. All heads swiveled in my direction.

"Yes," I agreed. "I like it very much."

"We *all* like our paychecks," he continued. "I like my paycheck. Who'd be here right now if you didn't get a paycheck? Show of hands." He raised his own tentatively to half-mast, but no other hands shot skyward. "Santa Cruz, would you be here if you didn't get a paycheck?" he posed to me.

"No, sir," said I.

"Exactly. And yet our firm is only weeks away from terminating all of our paychecks. Now why is that? Why would this firm terminate all of our paychecks?"

"Because we're all shite," I responded, hoping to score some self-deprecation points.

"What?" said he. It had been a rhetorical question, no response required. "No, Santa Cruz," he continued, with a patronizing tone, "it's not because we're shite. It's because we've run out of hard currency. The firm has exhausted its hard currency in the merger with Mars, Blefescu and Krike. It turns out that MB&K's gold reserves are figments of their financial officer's besotted imagination. They are chimera. They have no gold reserves, no hard currency, and that was why we originally wanted to merge with them! The irony is not lost on the board of directors, I assure you. In fact, we depleted our own assets to settle with their many creditors. We have failed in our due diligence. Where are we without hard currency?" He paused too long for it to be a rhetorical question, which is anything less than five seconds; so I ventured the following: "We're all shite?"

"Precisely, Santa Cruz. We're all shite," he rejoined.

Then he leaned forward, setting his legs on the floor and his hands on the armrests of his chair. “But, I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Did you know that we sit within a kilometer of one of the largest reserves of gold in the Western world?” he asked, in a hushed voice. “Did you know that within five minutes’ walk we could be in the orbit of one of the largest stockpiles of gold to have ever darkened a vault? I am going to tell you a little story,” he said, and to punctuate his tale he arose and began walking back and forth. “Many years ago, prior to the Second World War, the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini invaded the poor savages of Ethiopia. The Western world ignored this barbarous act under the guise of appeasement, but the Vatican was in Mussolini’s backyard and they clearly understood the dictator’s designs. So they crated all the gold that was stored in the cellars and catacombs of the Vatican and shipped it to what was then the safest spot on the planet—America.

“All told, there were one hundred eighty crates shipped to the U.S. on merchant vessels. The U.S. government stored the papist gold in cavernous subterranean vaults beneath each of the twelve Federal Reserve banks scattered throughout the country: in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, etc. The biggest district was on the West Coast, in San Francisco. There the gold sat while dictators and the Free World battled for control. At the end of the war, the Vatican was loath to repatriate the gold for fear that Italy, which had grown lawless and desperate, would fail in safeguarding the treasure. So the gold remained in the vaults of the Federal Reserve banks. Every decade or so the Vatican sent guarded emissaries to the U.S. to reclaim some of its gold.

“The federal government was complicit in this transfer until the day it defaulted on the federal debt; most sovereign currencies became worthless overnight—quaint denominations like the euro, the yen, the yuan. Thereafter, the world financial order reverted to the gold standard. But I’m sure you all know this; it’s basic Econ 101.”

We all nodded our heads.

“So who owned most of the world’s gold? The papists, of course. They had hoarded vast reserves and continued to accumulate even more, until the Vatican owned more of the world’s gold than it did not. Which brings us to today.

“The U.S. government, naturally, would like to confiscate the gold that lies beneath the floors of the San Francisco Federal Reserve building; the Vatican would like to repatriate it; every crook or syndicate in the U.S. would like to expropriate it. Neither party can claim it without provoking the other; they are at a stalemate.



"The struggle for the gold is a surrogate for the struggle at large between the Vatican and the U.S. government. No other force can contain the Feds; by defaulting on the federal debt, they succeeded in bankrupting and anarchizing every other major government on the planet. The Vatican stands as the sole countervailing force.

"Both parties have agents diffused throughout the population. Both keep restless watch over the gold sitting beneath Market Street. Both see the gold as the weight that tilts the power struggle in their favor.

"So how does this struggle affect us? How can we benefit from these diametric enemies? After all, we want what they want; we add nothing to the milieu. For this reason I have assembled us here, the brightest minds of our firm, to contemplate this very matter. We only want a minuscule, infinitesimal sprinkling of molecules and dust. I ask you all, what suggestions have you to offer?"

Silence, silence, silence, until the very exchange of air and carbon dioxide around the room became palpable. Finally, one man volunteered, "We could become Catholic?"

"Goldberg, how would that help?" the boss replied. "I need *good* ideas."

"I think we should form a committee," a woman offered.

"No, Planck, what decisions have ever been made in a committee? I have collected our greatest thinkers, so any increase among our number will only dumb us."

"What about a takeover?"

"No, DeMilo, the Federal Reserve is far too corrupt."

"Assassinations?"

"Remember the histrionics we went through just to buy new office furniture? I fear assassinations may be a bit out of our league. Bear in mind that we are a financial services conglomerate, not the federal government."

"Let's blow it up," my lugubrious elevator companion contributed.

"Lettie, that is the best idea I have heard thus far. But do you have any idea how deep those vaults are? They are impenetrable to basalt charges. Think again. I know you have another idea to offer me."

"Ask Santa Cruz," Lettie suggested, I think to pin me. Once again, all heads swiveled to me.

"Santa Cruz," our boss said, "what can you give us to pull us out of this torpor?"

"Move the gold," I said.

"Move the gold? How do we move the gold?"

"The Feds move the gold."

“Why would the Feds move the gold?”

“We convince them the Romans are coming. That will prompt them to move the gold to another location. Once the gold is aboveground and in transit, it will be easier for us to get to.”

“So how do we convince the Feds the Romans are coming?”

“We don’t need to show them that papists are massing on the border,” I said. I was getting exasperated with their inability to connect dots. Is this how business runs? No wonder capitalism was so unpopular. “We just need to create an online buzz of activity, like the movement of personnel and the shipment of material. Create fake invoices, food requisitions, bills of material. It’s a logistics thing. Make it look like there are enemy movements on the Internet, and some snoop in the government will start piecing it together.”

“What do we do once the gold is aboveground?”

How do we wipe our own bums? This group had not two neurons to rub together. “They can’t move the gold with fliers, because the gold is too heavy. Instead, they’ll have to use a caravan of trucks. Trucks can be waylaid, ambushed, rerouted, and commandeered. You could do it alone or form a syndicate. You could bribe guards or strafe them from the building tops. You could spy on the caravan to see where they take the gold. A minute ago you were content with gold dust; you could vacuum out the trucks afterward and collect great piles of gold dust. Once the gold is in motion, your options multiply.”

“Brilliant!” our executive roared. “That’s the first specimen of creativity I’ve seen from the lot of you. Johansen, how does the budget look this quarter for this kind of operation?”

“We can probably pull budget from shutting down operations in Guadalajara,” Johansen offered.

“Planck, what about the staffing? Can we shift some assignments around, perhaps start working twelve-hour days?”

“Not a problem, Mr. Craft.”

“Excellent! I want to see some Gantt charts and cost estimates *toute suite*. Santa Cruz, I want you to come with me; the rest of you call home and tell your loved ones you’ll see them in three months.”

I grabbed another pastry but the pause was too long for Mr. Craft, who gestured, “C’mon, Santa Cruz, leave that for the plebes.”

All of a sudden I was the dog’s bullocks and the brightest minds had become *personas non grata*. *Might as well enjoy it while it lasts*, I thought.

I followed Craft out his private door and into his office suite. “Sometimes I just want to lock them in a room with a chair and a banana hanging from the

ceiling to see if they're smart enough to feed themselves. You know, those monkey experiments they did in the 1950s? Or even better put them into a room with a wired floor and send jolts through it every few seconds. Can you imagine?" He did a frantic jig on the carpet, first on one foot and then on the other. "I know I should have gone into sociology rather than finance," he mused.

"Listen, Santa Clara; you know as well as I those morons won't be able to organize a siesta, so I'm putting you in charge of the operation. If they get in your way, fire them; if they produce a good idea, steal it and then fire them. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, sir."

"Brilliant. Business is a strange undertaking these days, Santa Clara. It's all about how many people you can crush under your feet. I like you. I think you're a climber. You do what I do and learn from me, and soon you'll have an office like mine. Of course, you may have to dress differently; we're still pretty formal in the City."

"Thanks for the advice, sir," I said. I was getting pretty good at being the corporate automaton.

"Listen, since you're dressed for a beach party, why don't you come with me to my flat? There's a bunch of people still sleeping all over the place from last night's party, the usual hangers-on. We can toast our new project."

"Brilliant!" I exclaimed.

He pointed out the huge window at the tops of the skyscrapers, which looked like piano keys against the cloud-filled sky. "'S over there. Are you ready to go?"

"For sure," I said. I started walking back to the lobby to take the elevator, but Craft stopped me. "Where you going, Santa Clara? The street is for plebes. We'll chopper over."

So we walked out onto the roof, the wind whipping furiously, to Craft's chopper. A pilot was waiting inside, and when we knocked she opened the door and helped us in. Craft made the universal "chopper up" signal with his index finger, and we lifted off the rooftop and sailed over to his building top nearby. You could see other choppers ferrying back and forth from building top to building top, like flies, in a way.

Craft seemed intent on giving me advice, as if he were a Bodhisattva or something. His advice was always centered on how successful I'd be if I were more like him. I pretended to listen while spinning the windmill disk I had gotten from Jake on the top of my finger, a diminutive flat-earth simulacrum.

"Me," he declaimed, "me, me, me, me, me, me, me. Me, me, me, me, me, me, me." A long, one-note monologism.

*I wonder if he can talk with a sharp windmill disk lodged between his jaws...*

The chopper landed atop Craft's building; the pilot seesawed it down onto the rooftop, and then flipped off the motor. As she helped us out of the chopper, I looked around. Craft hadn't been kidding about the human debris lying around in various stages of stupor. Even the whirr of the chopper had not wakened them. As we stepped around the sleepers akimbo, I spied a steaming pool of water near the entrance to Craft's penthouse. It looked ripe for me to climb inside.

"I've got a nine A.M.," Craft announced, in consultation with his timepiece.

"That's okay. I need a soak," I said.

"Right. Have a soak and partake of the amenities, Santa Fé. We'll talk later." He proceeded through a pair of doors, held open for him by an acolyte, and disappeared into his penthouse. I stripped off all but my beach trunks and gingerly lowered myself into the water. Imagine the panoply of dark, rain-swollen clouds, sky-high buildings, choppers swirling above, and water percolating at body temperature plus twenty degrees. Finally, I could relax and enjoy the apocalypse.

Shouldn't I be doing something right now? Shouldn't I be escaping from so-and-so, or plotting to overthrow what's-it? Shouldn't I...shouldn't I...I remembered once when I had gone to sleep early in the evening, knackered from a long trip. Char came over to visit me. I was lying on my couch, and she sat beside me and made furtive attempts to awaken me. I was too tired to respond, so I let her continue her gentle urging, "Bryan, wake up! Bryan, are you awake?" Thinking I was asleep, she began stroking my hair and singing—not "The Girl from Ipanema"—some song whose words, of course, I couldn't remember. Something about finding the guy whom you could take home to meet your parents.

Were I to be with her now, of course, some lunatic cult would be hammering on the front door while soldiers crashed boots-first through the windows. Since I can't be in the only place I want to be, then I may as well be sitting here, in a pool of foaming water at the top of the world.

Deep breath, head down under water...Now, wait until an unsuspecting villager steps into the water with a basketful of clothing. As she steps from stone to stone, surge forward and clasp her leg in your jaws, then roll over and over, twisting the femur until the ligaments snap and it tears out of the socket.

I wonder what it would be like to be Grendel, massacring thanes in the mead hall. Grendel was so misunderstood; his mother loved him, so he couldn't have been that bad.

Legs appeared at the opposite end of the pool, and I was so startled I rose out of the water, coughing and sputtering. It took me a few moments to regain my

breath and wring the water from my eyes. I glanced at the new arrivals to see if I had startled them, but they seemed nonplused. They were two women.

"Hi," I said, cautiously.

"Hi!" they replied, in chorus. "I'm Ari, and this is my sister, Ali," said one.

I looked at them more closely, flipping my wet hair out of my eyes. They looked identical: the same high cheekbones, the same pouty lips, only one was black and the other white.

"My name's Bryan," I said.

"Hi, Bryan! Where're you from?"

I pointed to the building I had recently exited. "Over there," I explained.

"We're from there," said Ari, pointing to a building behind her.

Ali added, "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday." She pointed in succession to various other building-tops. Evidently it was a different building for each day of the week.

"Don't you ever go down?" I asked, pointing to the street.

"No way," Ali replied. "Why would we want to go there?"

"You've never been down on the ground?" I asked, incredulous.

"Never. We just chopper from building-top to building-top."

"Augie says there's nothing on the street but dirty pedestrians and criminals," said Ari.

"It's for plebes," Ali added.

My eyes kept darting between them, looking for imperfections or dissimilarities, but other than the color of their skin and hair, they were exact copies. I couldn't tell if it was some kind of optical illusion or whatever. I believed everything I saw. I was like one of those naïve members of the animal kingdom that are fooled into thinking a walking stick insect was a branch, and a harmless ladybug was a venomous wasp. Were they genetic twins by Monsanto, or was it cosmetic surgery? They needed to wear tags so you could figure this out.

"Are you here to party?" Ali inquired.

"For sure," I replied, for I had decided I was tired of being flotsam for all these exogenous tides and undercurrents. I was moving up to jetsam.

"You should see the plebes that Augie usually brings up here," said Ari, rolling her eyes like an Amish slot machine. "They usually spend most of their time shunning us, like we're freaks or monsters. If you say two words to them, they cringe."

"Or they get so drunk or pharmaceutical that they start running around like eejits. You can't imagine how many of them fall over the side," Ali added. She

pantomimed a long fall with her had, flailing her fingers like worthless wings, only to splash into the water.

"It's party Darwinism," I concluded.

"So you're not a plebe?"

"No. In fact, this morning I blew up the Palace of Fine Arts," I replied, pointing out in the general direction of the Marina District (although you couldn't see it from our perspective). "Look, I have dust on my hands."

They both literally studied my phalanges for dust, despite the fact I was being symbolic.

"That was you? Ali and I heard this loud boom this morning; that's what woke us up. We were hoping it was Rotten Old Perv's building, but no—there it is, still standing." She pointed off in the sky toward Wednesday's building. "So are you a terrorist?"

"I suppose so. Before this, I was staying with the Earth Liberation."

"Are they really always so angry?" asked Ari.

"Before that I was locked in a black hole for two weeks without food or water. I even started hallucinating."

"I've been on that diet," said Ali, looking self-appraisingly at her corrugated abdomen. She grabbed a modicum of flesh between her thumb and index finger. "The black hole diet."

"Before that I was sitting in a Buckyball's; that's a coffee shop," I quickly added, knowing they had never been down to the street, "and while I was there, soldiers crashed in and shot everyone dead."

"That's why we never go down to the street," Ari mentioned. I noticed with each recitation, they inched farther apart from each other, one moving clockwise and the other counter-clockwise, until they had inched to either side of me.

"What before that?"

"Let's see, before that I swam across the bay in army gear; that was fun; and before that I was in a war zone, and before that I had a stigmata."

"What's that?"

"It's where you bleed involuntarily from your hands and feet."

"I always wanted to grow a tail," Ari volunteered, "so thick you could sit on it, like a stool."

"Wouldn't you have to drag it around wherever you went?" Ari probed.

"No, I'd leave it hanging in the air, like Tyrannosaurus Rex."

"But wouldn't that be even worse? It would be even *more* work to hold up in the air."

That stumped Ali, so Ari continued, "Before that what?"

"Before that I was kidnapped."

"Poor you!" Ali exclaimed. "What you need is some affection."

By this time, they were on either side of me.

"Let me rub your shoulders," said Ari.

"Let me rub your face," said Ali.

Despite these contradictory instructions, we managed to somehow accommodate each other, using the buoyancy of the warm water, the curvature of the pool, and the fungibility of limbs.

I wonder if I'm the type of person who has to prove how much he loves his missus by the number of temptations he resists... There's definitely—

"Hey Ali, Ari."

"Hey Petie!" my partners replied.

I looked up and saw a fourth person enter the pool.

"Why did you let me sleep out on the roof?" he asked. "You know I hate when I do that. Why didn't you put me to bed?"

"You looked so peaceful, I didn't want to bother you," Ali explained.

"Hi, I'm Bryan," said I.

"Petie," he replied. He was definitely a boyo. Augie kept rooftop company with an interesting crowd.

"Did you know that Bryan can bleed voluntarily?" said Ari, in an excited tone.

"Outrageous!" Petie exclaimed. "You know what I'd love to be able to do is turn my neck around three hundred and sixty degrees. That way I could carry on a conversation in all directions without ever having to move."

"Hey, that way you could see how big your own butt was!" said Ali.

By now, more Gomorrahites were stirring, and as they awoke, they joined us in the heated pool. It began to rain San Francisco style, and you could see small columns of steam rising from the water's surface. The aroma of cooked breakfast foods emanated from somewhere in the penthouse.

I decided I might be interested in breakfast (since I never got my food from Mack's and only had a mouthful of business pastry) and all of a sudden I was incredibly tired. We had been up all night preparing for the bombing. Ari and Ali had disappeared; maybe I could go find them. I left the warm pool water and put the rest of my beach gear back on, though I was still wet.

To flee the rain I went through the doors of the penthouse. *Just have a little brekkie and then find somewhere to sleep*, I told myself. I walked through the penthouse, opening closed doors to scout out a place that was dark, vacant, and quiet. I was also getting closer to the source of the brekkie aroma, and could hear kitchen sounds. On my way I happened into a large room, where Augie Craft was

holding forth to several seated plebeians. Ali and Ari sat on either side of him. They'd bookend anybody, I decided.

"Aah, Santa Claus, come join us. We were just talking about another financial dilemma, and maybe you could help us with it."

Ari, who was wrapped in a blanket to warm her, opened it to invite me to share it with her.

"The problem, Mr. Claus, is this," a man began. He was a very toadish plebe, and looked like it would only require a few drinks to compel him to plummet headlong over the edge of the building. "There is a side in one of our transactions where we must actually hold cash.

"We trade munitions to the rebel groups like the Aryan Nation, the Navajo Indian tribe, or the Southern Confederacy. They in turn give us livestock, rice, wheat, soybeans, adge. Holding munitions is good, because its value rises every month due to hyperinflation. Holding livestock and agricultural products is good, once again due to hyperinflation." Each time he said the word *hyperinflation*, he drew a sweeping circle with his hands, as if it were a visible as well as audible term.

"We sell the foodstuffs to the federal government, and of course they pay only in cash. While we hold the cash, its value declines dramatically, once again due to hyperinflation [he drew another hyperinflation circle]. If we hold the cash for a week, it may lose half its value."

"What's that?" asked Ali. She pointed at a spot outside the large window that overlooked the skyline.

Augie Craft drew back the curtains, and the cloudy gray light filled the room. At second glance we could see a constellation of strange-looking crafts hovering in front of us, as if we were a traffic intersection located a thousand feet above the street. There were fliers with eggbeaters, corkscrews, hammering pistons, and whirligigs.

"Oh my God!" shrieked Augie Craft. "It's the Earth Liberation. They've come for me!"

Through the window I could make out some of the pilots—Jake, Lawrence, Gwen, and Crossbow. Had they come for Augie Craft? Of course not. They wouldn't have risked the exposure. They were coming for me.

Craft was in a state of panic. *I hope he brought an extra pair of shorts*, I thought. He paced back and forth, wringing his hands like Lady Macbeth in one of the later acts. "Lawrence has come for me. Lawrence has come for me," he wailed. Then he snapped his fingers and said, "Everyone into the chopper!" He sped around the room, helping the toadish businessmen out of their seats, and pulling



Ari and me up by our blanket. "Into the chopper!" he exclaimed again. He urged us out of the room, while contacting the chopper pilot on his phone.

The chopper was already revved when we reached the rooftop. I could see the Gomorrahites, still in the pool, looking at us and the hovering fleet with jaws dropped. This was a time when Petie could have used his three hundred and sixty degree vision, I thought. The fliers tried to box the chopper in, but after we boarded, the pilot was able to take off by flying directly into Kwami's flier and the poor man, utterly surprised, made an emergency landing on the rooftop. Then off we rocketed, with the fleet of machinery in tow.

We traveled east, over the vast California mountains and the verdant plains and valleys. It was a tour you couldn't pay enough money for. Behind us came the fliers. At first they menaced us, but I think they realized it would result in collisions and crashes, so instead they flew at a short distance behind us, waiting for our hydrogen to run out. Augie Craft sat by himself, lost in some kind of mental fetal position. Ali, Ari, and I huddled beneath the blanket, trying to stay warm. The hefty businessmen kept to themselves. I was worried about the chopper's equilibrium because they sat on the left side while we huddled on the right. Surely the chopper would have been side-heavy, but the pilot was probably compensating for it.

"I knew Lawrence would find me someday," said Augie Craft. "They've chased me from São Paulo to Vieques. Why do they have to pursue me? I have enough demons already."

Because of the sonorous hum of the chopper and the twins' body heat, my eyelids began to weigh heavily. I was mesmerized by the long horizon of the afternoon sky. I circled my arms around my twins and tried to sleep...

\* \* \* \*

I...the...the chopper was empty. My dyadic friends, Ali and Ari, Augie Craft, the portly businessmen, even the pilot was gone. Poof. This was wrong. I rushed to the forward part of the chopper to the pilot's seat. Here was me having no idea what to do. The screen said "auto-pilot" which was reassuring, but there was a flashing message that read "Hydrogen .04%," which could not have been a good thing. I tried to operate the chopper, but it asked me for a thumbprint. As soon as I did that, I figured, here come the Feds. Outside it was dusk; it was still light enough for me to scan the sky for Lawrence and the fliers by Jake. Nobody. They were no longer following. What the heck had happened? Maybe they had para-

chuted out, and Lawrence had pursued them as they landed. Wouldn't it have been a courtesy to waken me?

The chopper was hovering in a circle about ten meters above the ground, at the slow pace of a carousel.

Don't be a fool! Thumb the screen and take over the controls. Better let the Feds get you than crash into the ground. But it was too late. The hydrogen gauge read "0.00%" and a woman's soothing voice announced "Please deplane using emergency procedures," in the same tone of voice my mother used for bed time stories.

Then silence—the *whirr* of the chopper was gone. The chopper continued at the same altitude due to momentum, but gradually began to nose downward. Do these things land gracefully? Never mind. Frantically I scanned the pilot's area for an extra parachute. Nothing. We were too close to the ground for a parachute, anyway. I unlatched the door, struggled to swing it open, then closed my eyes, and jumped. *Bamm!* I instantly hit something hard, which knocked the wind out of me; then I began tumbling head over heels. I stood up as quickly as possible so I could watch the chopper crash into the earth. Within a few seconds I heard the jarring roar of metal. No flames? Wouldn't you want a dramatic orange ending to your chopper escape? But no joy.

## CHAPTER 9

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# KNOWING WHERE YOU WANT TO BE, DURING AN APOCALYPSE

*I'll bet I'm in Texas*, I thought. Fall from the sky anywhere on the continent, and chances are you'll land in Texas. Was Texas bourgeois or proletariat? Was it overrun by a cult, or by the Freemasons? Was it hostile? I had no idea. Next time I'll pay more attention to the news when I go to the uniloo.

I had to find where the chopper landed. Sure, it was the most likely spot that someone would come looking for me, but I couldn't abide the thought that it may have plowed into the side of someone's home. I had to see if there was any damage. I walked into the direction where I had heard the chopper collide. The ground was thick with brush. To protect my face, I decided to walk with my hands out in front of me. Beach gear was not the appropriate choice, I noticed. I needed to learn to dress for the occasion.

I spotted a thick gouge in the ground, and as I looked ahead through the brush I could see the chopper fuselage jutting out of the dirt. I crouched on my knees and studied the spot before approaching. Obviously the chopper hadn't crashed into the side of the house, but now that I'd found it I could scavenge for survival gear—a hairbrush and a mirror, perhaps.

I was startled to see a very tiny figure walking up the fuselage, stopping when he reached the highest point. It looked like a small child with a stick in his hand. He gestured to the ground, and soon was joined by more children. I hadn't seen a two-footer since I left the crèche at the camp in Fresno. I decided I would have to approach them without frightening them. I stood upright and said softly, "Hello?" as I walked to the crippled hull of the chopper. The two-footer on the top of chopper looked at me as I approached; then he brought his stick to his shoulder and I heard a spray of bullets pepper the ground beside me. The little bugger was shooting at me!

I quickly backed away and hid in the brush. What the heck? Then several of them jumped on me, biting and pinching. I didn't want to hurt them so I tried to extricate myself; only more arrived, and they began clubbing and throwing rocks, not caring whether they struck me or one of their fellow two-footers.

"Okay, okay!" I shouted. "I surrender!" This was like Gulliver's Travels, only the Lilliputians were REALLY PISSED OFF!

The biting and clubbing stopped. Instead, they plied their weight to keep me from moving (and almost breathing) while someone wrapped large coils of rope around my hands and legs. As soon as I was secured, they got off me one by one, occasionally getting a final kick or scratch as they left. Finally, one of the taller ones approached me. He paused and lit a fag, which he took the time to slowly inhale and exhale so the smoke would cloud before me.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Up."

"How can I stand up? My feet are tied," I replied.

This observation merited his cigarette flicked at my face, so it was probably time to shut up.

He patiently lit another cigarette while one of the bolder kids raced between us to pull the flicked cigarette off the ground.

"Untie his feet," he commanded, to his coterie. A few approached me and uncoiled the rope around my legs. Then I arose; rather difficult, I found, with hands bound. The two-footer delivered a series of hand-signals; someone gave me a kick-start, and they and I began walking off into the brush.

For two-footers, it seemed odd that they marched in silence. As I remembered, the children in the crèche were unstoppably boisterous. Nonetheless these kids had a military discipline about them. Occasionally their leader would walk beside one or the other, put something in their hands, and then walk away. Then the child would bring her hand to her mouth and empty whatever she was holding. It looked like a pill of some sort. Oh my God, this was the drugged children's army

I had heard about. I had only thought it was myth. Of course, *I* would be kidnapped by a drugged child army, I thought.

I seemed to have one misadventure after another. I was like poor old Gulliver, or even Candide. One minute I was held captive by savage poetasters who were half-man, half-mollusk; the next minute I was transported to an alkaline country where the women cavort on all fours, like ruminants, and their pudenda blossomed into roses as they approach estrus.

But in truth, I was complicit. Why had I gotten onboard the chopper when Lawrence and Co. showed up in their fliers? Why had I not simply stayed behind? I had already decided that my path lay with Lawrence, right?

It showed you how selfish I was. Here I was complaining about my sad misadventures, and I was surrounded by lumbering two-footers, some shorter than the rifles they dragged behind them. To me it was a sign there was something dreadfully wrong with the army, when the rifles were taller than most of the recruits.

Now that my fight/flight reactions had dissipated, I could feel the effect of the gashes, avulsions, and bruises the little buggers had inflicted. I wanted to raise my hands to my face to stem the rivulets of blood I felt it coursing down my neck, but the huge weight of cords wrapped around my wrists prevented me. Nobody gives you a mirror after they capture you; I was sure that was a part of the Geneva Convention.

I needed to keep my eyes open for avenues of escape, yet I didn't want to fall victim to their teeth and nails again, or their erratic gunfire.

How far were we going to walk? I didn't have the bladder for long marches and excessive periods of captivity. We continued walking for perhaps thirty minutes, and then ahead of us I could hear the sounds of a settlement: hushed voices, boots crunching on the sand, dogs barking. No lights, though. I saw the outline of single-story buildings; we were challenged by a pair of guards, children a few years older than my captors. I changed hands; one of the guards gestured with her rifle for me to follow her; rifle-speak. She led me to a building where she employed several keys to work a series of locks on the door. Once the door was unlocked, she rapped the butt of her rifle against it several times and warned, "Prisoner coming. Back off!" Then she opened the door and used the heel of her boot to propel me into the darkness of the room. Then she shut the door and bolted the series of locks.

The darkness coalesced around me; I felt like the ephemeral stuff that decays, leaving behind a fossil.

I needed to feel the safety of a wall at my back, so I scooted myself backward until I felt my spine strike a wall; I leaned against it and concentrated on the mass

of cords around my wrists. I was able to work one hand free via contortion, and that gave me enough slack to work the other out. Then I felt myself for damage. I was sure the rabid buggers had infected me with enough germs to liquefy my organs and make the juices in my urinary tract boil like steam. Two ears, one nose, both eyelids intact. I could still pose for Miss Captive America.

Was I alone? Probably not, since the guard had yelled her warning to someone when she pushed me through the door.

"Am I alone?" I tested the darkness.

"No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o," came the reply.

"Who's here?"

The response was an ambient chorus of me me me. With my luck, of course, they would be cannibals.

"I came here on a chopper flight from San Francisco," I said. "Is there anyone here that was also on that flight?"

Silence. "It was today. We were being chased," I added, giving more details, as if someone could have forgotten that chopper flight.

"Not me, boy," one of the voices replied. "Been here two days."

"Two days? How did you get here?" I asked.

"Damn poppy growers," he complained. "They wanted my land for their damn poppy crop. Two weeks ago their infant army showed up on my front porch. They set fire to the house and tied me up, beat me senseless. When I woke up, I was lyen here in the dark. It took me two days to untie myself."

"Hell, I begged them to take me," another man volunteered. "I live over in Malo Suerte, and the plague killed nearly everyone in the town. The gumnt started rounden people up, and me and my kids fled, thinken a' goen to Houston. That's when the poppy growers found us. I figured the kids would get food and a bed, which was better than gotten locked up in a gumnt plague camp. Me I didn't care if they killed. I already contributed to the gene pool."

"I been in the army for five years," said another voice, a young girl. "You think we want to march around all night and shoot people? They never feed us, they beat us all the time; you can't do anything about it 'cause you're crazed out of your mind from opium. Why did you fat old bastards let this happen?"

"Don't blame me! I'm from Malo Suerte!" the voice defended himself.

"How did you end up in this hole?" I asked the young soldier.

"I don't know. We were out on a scouting mission, right? We got a little juiced, you know, and then I fell asleep. You don't have any juice on you, do you?"

"Nope."

"Crap. Well, when I woke up, the rest of the patrol was dead, cut from ear to ear. I say we was attacked, but they say there weren't no enemy for miles; I did it."

"Did you?"

"Hellifino. I never hearda someone killen her mates in her sleep. I'm gonna get hanged so it don't really matter."

"That's barbaric," said another voice, an older woman.

"They do all their hangings once a month. It's awesome! You guys really haveta see it!" exclaimed our young soldier.

"I don't get it," said the man from Malo Suerte. "One minute you're blamen us fat old bastards for letten things happen, the next minute you're inviten us to a hangen. I don't get it."

"Shut up, you damn plager!"

"This is a land of savages," exclaimed an older woman. "My sister and I were traveling on a pilgrimage to the Healer of Baton Rouge to heal her lust for fornication when we were set upon by a band of feral hooligans. They took us to meet the opium potentate, who made my sister his whore, his concubine, his harlot." How many synonyms did she think she needed to get her point across?

"I'm right here," another voice chimed in. "You don't have to say all those bad things about me."

"So how did you end up in here?" I asked.

"Because my sister did not content herself to fornicate with the opium potentate alone. She had to wrap her legs around his brother, his cook; but then he caught her in bed with his *wife*. That's when he threw us in here."

"So what do you think will happen to us?"

"Some of us will be hanged; some of us will get ransomed. I wish there was a way out of here."

"Who said there's a way out of here?" asked a voice that had not spoken before. It sounded like an old man.

"Nobody said there was a way out of here," said the man from Malo Suerte.

"Tell us about the way out of here," I said, to the new voice, thinking there was some double meaning to his evasive tone.

"How do I know I can trust you? How do I know you ain't a spy?"

"I've been rotting in this hole beside you for the last three weeks," said the older woman. "What kind of spy would put up with your stench?"

"How do we know you ain't a spy?" asked the man from Malo Suerte.

"If you know the way out, why don't you leave? That sounds like spy behavior."

"If you show us the way out, I'll be your girlfriend *forever!*" said the lascivious sister.

"Heh heh. I ain't got any teeth and if you're not too particular about a man's face, then I'm the guy for you!" he exclaimed. "Okay, if you want to find the way out, it's over here."

"Keep on talking and we'll find you, lover boy," I said. I stood up slowly, lacking a sense of equilibrium because of the darkness, and used the wall as a guide to walk to where he spoke. The others in the room followed suit, shuffling, bumping, and scraping toward the end of the room. When the shuffling stopped we did a touch-count; we were seven.

"So where's the way out?" we asked.

"Here it is!" the old man exclaimed, and he pushed aside a pile of debris. If it were possible, you could almost see the outline of a hole even darker than the one we were already in.

"What is it?"

"It's a tunnel," he replied.

"How do you know it leads anywhere?" I asked.

"Feel!" he said. He grabbed my arm and thrust it into the tunnel. You could feel a slight circulation of air. "There's wind," I said.

"Damn straight!"

"I'm not going in there," announced the older sister. "It could be a trap."

"This is what we do," I suggested. "One of us goes first, with a rope tied around his leg. If the other end of the tunnel is safe, he tugs on the rope a couple of times so we know it's okay to send the next person through. If he is trapped, he tugs on the rope three times and we pull him back out. What do you think?"

"Who has any rope?"

"I do. My hands were tied with at least a hundred feet of rope. Be right back."

I used the wall as my guide a second time to walk back to where the loop of cord was; when I felt it with my feet, I grabbed the rope and returned to the rest of the group.

"Who volunteers to go first?" I asked.

"All right, I'll go," I added, since there was no response. I tied one end of the rope to my leg. "Remember, if I tug twice, it means I'm safe. I'll untie the rope and you can pull it back to use on the next person. If I tug three times, I'll need you to pull me out."

"What if we run out of rope?" asked the man from Malo Suerte.

"*Don't*. If you start to run out of rope, then improvise. Tie your clothes on to the end of the rope, or feel around the room here for more."



"Two tugs is good, three tugs is bad?"

"Yes. VCD," I added. Then I got on my hands and knees and crawled head first into the tunnel.

At first the tunnel was wide and smooth, but after about thirty feet, it tapered inward so that my shoulders were only inches from the walls. Rather than crawl on all fours, I had to flatten myself and crawl worm-like on my arms. I could pin my legs against outcroppings in the wall for leverage. If any of the others were large, they would never fit through the tunnel. This was more arduous than climbing through the birth canal, I thought.

"It's going to dead-end," I told myself. "I'll run out of rope, and they won't be able to pull me out." Could I back myself out under my own steam? Doubtful. I still had Jake's whirlygig in my pocket; maybe I could use it to claw my way through. Doubtful again. The best I could hope for was to use its sharp edges to clean the dirt out of my fingernails. Would I want to die lying on my stomach or my back? I thought. Maybe back, but then I thought of several reasons why I would prefer to die lying on my back.

The air circulation was increasing so my plans to inter myself seemed for naught. The tunnel would likely emerge in the opium potentate's backyard or wine cellar, and when they pulled me out they would surely hang my head on a pikestaff. I couldn't blame them. They probably dug the tunnel for entertainment, placing wagers on which prisoner would crawl through first. I could see the potentate tugging twice gleefully on the rope, luring the next crawler out. That's what I would do if I were an opium potentate.

Ahead was the end of the tunnel, bathed in the silver aura of moonlight. Within a few seconds I was through, a miracle of parturition, lying on the open ground, panting heavily. I tugged twice on the umbilicus, and when I felt a tug in the other direction I untied the rope from my leg, and it retracted into the tunnel. Now, time to eat the placenta.

I lay on my back, fixated on the constellations above me.

After about thirty minutes, I heard some scraping and muttering about the "filthy, fetid hole" and reached inside the tunnel to pull out the older sister.

"Don't you *dare* touch me!" she exclaimed, after I had already pulled her out. "Wanton, perverted boy!" It was an instruction easy to comply with; we tugged twice on the rope and waited for whoever was next.

Next came the man from Malo Suerte. He had such a slight build he was able to crawl through the tunnel on all fours. But as he climbed out he explained, "The rest ain't comen out."

"What do you mean?"

"This lady's sister and the old man who showed us the tunnel are busy shaggen. They said they're stayen behind."

"That is ridiculous," I said. "Whoever stays behind is going to get beaten until they divulge where the rest of us fled. It's a death warrant."

"Don't tell me! I know that," answered the man.

"Okay, I'm going back there," said I. "I'll talk to them."

I crawled back through the tunnel, careful not to pull on the rope, just in case someone else on the other end decided to come through. I could imagine meeting one of our team head to head inside the tunnel. Stuck!

Crawling back to our enclosure was much easier than crawling out, and soon I emerged back in the room.

"Who's next?" I asked.

"We ain't goen," the old man replied.

"Why not?"

"Cause if I go through first, she's gonna shag whoever's left behind. If she goes first, she's gonna shag whoever's on the other end. I can't leave her."

"What about the other two?" I asked, trying to feel for the young soldier and the older guy.

"We ain't goen through until he go through. We think he's a spy."

This was like the riddle about the farmer, the sack of corn, the fox, and the goose, I thought. How do you row them across the river without the fox eating the goose, or the goose eating the corn? As if we had time for riddles when we were escaping from the child army of an opium lord.

"This is what we're going to do," I said. "She's going through first. The only ones on the other side are her sister and the guy from Malo Suerte. She wouldn't shag her own sister, would she?"

"Prolly not," the old man replied.

"There is a chance that she'll shag the guy from Malo Suerte, but it's only a chance. However, if she stays here in the room then I'll shag her for sure. Do you want that?"

"No."

"Okay, then, you're next," I said to the younger sister. I felt for her leg and tied the end of the rope to it. "You can get that shag when we get to the other side," she whispered in my ear.

"Go!" I commanded.

In she went. I had to restrain the old man from following her through the tunnel, until we felt the two tugs on the rope. Then nothing would keep him from rifling through. After him I sent the young soldier, and finally the landowner.

Then I felt the tugs on the rope. I crawled into the tunnel, careful to restore the pile of debris over the tunnel's mouth.

When I emerged on the other side, I was absolutely exhausted. I retrieved the rope and did my best to cover the tunnel entrance with rocks and dirt. My arms and legs could barely support my weight. The others were equally enfeebled, and we collapsed en masse with just enough energy to fall asleep, although the younger sister, whose ardor was infinite, awoke me several times to remind me of the shag I owed her. That was an easy no.

\* \* \* \*

"Come on, baby, give it to me. Come on baby," she urged. Her hands were down my pants, but she was pressing kisses to the forehead of the man from Malo Suerte. Startled, I quickly pulled her hands away. Seeing that I was awake, she quickly turned her attention to me. "Come on, big boy, you know you want me!"

In the morning light I could see her in full; she was tiny, shorthaired, wiry. She didn't look nymphomaniacal; I hoped the Healer of Baton Rouge would be able to heal her.

"Don't you want to shag *just a little bit*?" she asked, as if you could shag in fractions.

"No, no, no," I said. "What about your old man?"

"You shag him. He doesn't look too pretty in the daylight."

I tried to find him in the huddled bodies of escapees, but he was out of sight.

"I know you want to," she persisted, grabbing my testicles through my beach britches.

"Hands off!" I exclaimed; but my protestation was drowned out by a loud banging sound.

"What the heck was that?" I heard the sound again, and then repeatedly, as if someone were banging on a drum.

"It's the Christies," the young soldier replied, yawning.

"The what?"

"You'll see."

"Why are they making such a loud racket? Aren't they afraid of the army finding them?"

"We ain't supposed to touch 'em," she explained. "Don't bother the Christies'," she added, in apostrophe.

In addition to the drum banging, I could hear the sound of wailing and ululations. But the sight eclipsed the sound. A man appeared behind the stand of trees

and brush; he wore no shirt, no shoes, but around his waist he had strapped a threadbare raincoat as a loincloth. His hair was in tufts; his eyes were swollen and the flesh on his forehead, neck, and chest was rashed and mottled from the sun. He had sunk so low on the primate scale that you probably couldn't find a Neanderthal woman to have sex with him, you know? He brandished a leather strap that he used to flail his shoulders and back with, like a human metronome. His back was veinous and striated with lesions. Each blow provoked a shudder through his frame, and then he would utter the words "Praise God" but it was really to the tune of "*Oh my God.*" Could you really whack yourself hard enough to cause that much pain? Wouldn't you instinctively deflect or soften the blow? For a test I whacked myself on the head and whoa! It was easier to hurt yourself than I'd thought.

Behind the flagellant walked a man and woman, side-by-side; they had branches, as straight as broomsticks, strapped around them as if they were portable birdcages. Looking more closely though, I could see the branches were laden with thorns that pierced the flesh with each step, leaving blood markers. Oh, to be a mosquito among this lot. The flies were already banqueting.

Behind them came three figures; their arms were roped to the horizontal beams of the crosses they carried on their backs. The crosses were longer than the figures were tall; consequently, as they walked, each cross-bearer dragged the post of the cross on the ground behind him, leaving a furrow in the sandy loam. The beams were thick, rough-hewn, as if formed from old railroad ties; the figures looked like woeful, wandering marionettes in search of hands to animate them.

Behind them came the wailers, dressed from head to foot in black shrouds with their hands outstretched in petition, their voices ululating at a deafening volume. Then came a phalanx of drummers, bangers, and cymbalists. Their role must have been to make everyone else suffer.

It was funny how they traveled together by affliction, sort of like having wind, string, and percussion sections.

Next I saw eight souls towing a huge sled, on which rode a wondrous Sisyphean engine. A cylinder beneath the sled rotated as they pulled the sled forward; an upright rod was attached to the cylinder, and the rod transferred the horizontal rotation of the cylinder to a vertical rotation. A rotor sat atop the rod and it reverted the vertical rotation back to horizontal rotation. Consequently, as the men and women pulled the sled forward, a disk with arms would spin and smite them each in the backside. This gave them two sufferings—that of towing the sled and that of being struck backside by the rotating arms. Somehow I sensed the imprimatur of Jake in this ingenious design.

Next came a procession of two-, three-, and four-footers who menaced each other with starter instruments, while singing a tune about the great horse of Bably On.

This was beginning to look like *Christ's Triumphant Entry to Texas*.

Then came five men and women, walking abreast, each holding a Bible in one hand and passionately exhorting the air with the other. Each competed to out shout his or her neighbor. When they approached our group, one of them left their ranks and threw himself on the ground before us. He began to wail in a one-man Shakespearian tragedy.

"Mine eyes do fail with tears!" he exclaimed,

"My bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth, for the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the sucklings swoon in the streets of the city! They say to their mothers, Where is corn and wine? when they swooned as the wounded in the streets of the city, when their soul was poured out into their mothers' bosom! What thing shall I take to witness for thee? what thing shall I liken to thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? what shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Zion? for thy breach is great like the sea: who can heal thee? Thy prophets have seen vain and foolish things for thee: and they have not discovered thine iniquity, to turn away thy captivity; but have seen for thee false burdens and causes of banishment! All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men call The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth?

"All thine enemies have opened their mouth against thee: they hiss and gnash the teeth: they say, we have swallowed her up: certainly this is the day that we looked for; we have found, we have seen it."

Then he began ripping at his clothes and hair, until he observed his coterie had marched past him, which prompted him to collect his Bible and shredded habiliments and run to catch up with them.

Finally we were passed by a pack of barking dogs, a contortionist, a man urinating on himself, and a trail of disconsolate spouses and family members.

Our little soldier leapt to her feet and began wailing.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" we asked her.

"My sins are too great!" she cried. "I must join them."

"No dear, stay with us," the older sister pleaded. "We'll take care of you."

"No, you're wrong! Nothing can wash my sins away!" She broke away from us and ran in pursuit of the vanishing Christies.

"Let her go," I advised. What other future did she have? Perhaps she could find solace in their number.

"The army don't touch the Christies," muttered the man from Malo Suerte. "I'm gonna join them Christies. The army don't touch 'em. I can look for my family that way."

"Will you look after the little one?" asked the older sister. "Make sure she doesn't hurt herself."

"I'll keep my eye on her," he replied, already removing his clothes and running to catch up with the procession.

"I'm goen back home," proclaimed the landowner. "I'm goen to get my property back."

"Won't they kill you?" the older sister asked.

"Dyen for your property? Hell, in Texas we call that a fair trade!" he replied, with newfound bravado. Then he left, also.

That left me, the older and younger sisters, and the old man.

"Where you headed?" I asked.

"We can't delay our visit to the healer any longer," the older sister explained. "You can see how desperately she needs help."

"Then I'm comen with!" the old man insisted.

In my head I quickly sketched my options: avoid the opium growers, their opiated child army, and try to find my way back west. My best bet was to find a large city with air transport.

"Do you know how far Houston is from here?" I asked the group.

"It's the same way as we're goen," the old man responded.

"Good. Then I'll join you as far as Houston. But the first thing I suggest we do is to find some water to wash in. We're still wearing half the soil from the tunnel. We've got 'prison break' written all over us."

\* \* \* \*

We slept on the open ground. Twice as I began to fall asleep I felt the younger sister (whose name was Irene) reach her hand into my beach britches (instantly rebuffed) and once I awoke to find my private parts in the grip of a callused fist ("She made me give it a try!" the old man explained, in self-defense, as I kicked him away; now, would I have to cut them off?). The only way I figured I would get some rest was to interpose the older sister's formidable girth between us (her name was Nancy) and thus was able to sleep unmolested, until morning.



The muted colors of dawn reminded me of Las Vegas with its omnipresent canopy of twilight. That seemed like such a long time ago, a different epoch, even though it could not have been more than a month's time. It was like reading a few pages from a book, closing it, and then reading pages from another book—different scenes, different eras, a different milieu. What would it take to get me back to that blissful afternoon with Char at Hoover Dam? Without verse, wine or bread we shared an afternoon that Omar Khayam could not have penned (or was that *quilled?*). We had only lacked the words to *Ipanema*, remember?

As if nothing had come before and nothing would ever come after, I would die happily with just those twenty-four hours. My advice to everyone during the apocalypse: Glue yourself hermetically to the person you love.

I scrutinized my sleeping companions; obviously they would be an anchor to me in my travels, but I wanted to see them safely through the opium lands. As was my morning wont I arose and attended to my ablutions in a secluded growth of brush; and while I waited for them to waken I did sit-ups. I had noticed that my new quixotic life was beginning to degrade my physique.

"She needs our help, you know," said Nancy, who had wakened (probably because I had pinned my feet beneath her backside for leverage while I did my sit-ups).

"Who? Irene?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "she's got the 'victim's mentality.' She has to shag whatever comes into her line of sight. Can you take care of her?"

"Of course, I'll keep an eye on her."

"No, I mean *take care of her*. Give her a shag every couple of hours. She'll stick to you like a magnet. You can keep her from concupiscing with strangers."

"I can't," I replied. "I have someone I love very much. Besides, wouldn't that just be me abusing your sister, instead of someone else?"

"Better you than the animals she wraps her legs around."

"If I may ask," I ventured, "why are you so sure the Healer of Baton Rouge can help her?"

"Bear in mind, I'm not *so sure*," Nancy replied. "It's in the hands of the Lord, isn't it?"

"I do have hope. I have a cousin who had an abhorrence of her own sweat," Nancy continued. "When she felt herself perspire she would score her own flesh

with her fingernails to counteract the sensation, which as you can imagine only amplified her reactions.

"She lived night and day in a converted meat locker, which was refrigerated. The cold kept her from sweating. Then she began to abhor the milky vapors that emanated from her own breath, and strove to rend her own flesh and kill herself. Since she would not travel, my family sent her brother to the healer, to be healed in her stead. The healer prayed over her brother, and two days later she emerged from the meat locker healed, in the fullness of spirit."

"What happened to her brother?"

"Well, he became demented. He grew obsessed with tragedies and accident scenes, the sight of ambulances carrying stricken victims to the hospital, the trauma of the emergency ward. On frequent occasions he was found lurking in hospital rooms, especially the operating rooms, staring wide-eyed at the surgeons and nurses. He would even substitute himself for the needy patient, shrouding himself beneath the hospital sheets in the hope of having receiving some treatment or surgery. Most of the time the staff discovered him prior to any ministrations, as he had become familiar to them. One day though, they found him on the floor; he had fallen off a hospital bed onto a surgical tray laden with instruments, and as he fell to the ground he was impaled with a hundred different blades."

"OMG!" I exclaimed.

"Do not think this was some form of quid pro quo, one dementia replaced by another, as if maladies like matter cannot be created or destroyed; only transferred. I too have found a cure from the Healer of Baton Rouge."

"What was your healing?"

"When I was a young woman, I once espied a man urinating in an alleyway, and I became so engrossed by the spectacle of his exposed member that I convinced myself I became pregnant, despite the fact that I was then, and am now still, a virgin. However, I did not fantasize that I was with child; instead, I felt I carried inside me a male genital, like some kind of fleshy loaf I was gestating. Since my parents were law-abiding, they drove me to the Abortion Hospital, where a team of doctors examined me and, despite my protestations, pronounced me unfertilized. My parents' fears were assuaged, but I continued to believe I carried a man's genitalia in my womb. My belly swelled and my breasts grew pendulous. My parents were in extremis, so they drove me to Baton Rouge to meet the Healer. There in his chambers he prayed mightily and beseeched the Lord, and lo and behold my eyes were opened and I acknowledged the fallacy of my thoughts; I was healed!"



"Hmmm...What happened to your parents?"

"Well, my father developed a predilection for urinating every time he passed a tree or shrub, as if he were marking his territory dog-style. My mother, on the other hand, must needs crouch down and explore with her nostrils any evidence of moisture with great olfactory urgency, as if it were a florid bouquet. You can imagine how onerous a simple walk down the street would be with them. I had to restrain them with collars to inhibit an endless session of spraying and sniffing."

"Poor them!" I eulogized.

"It wasn't so bad for my father. We lived on a ranch—that was back before the Cattle Deaths—so it didn't matter if he left markings all over the ground, since it was lost in the cattle urine and manure; but as you can imagine, for my mother it was a diametrically different story, as she flitted about the ranch eagerly inhaling every excrescence."

"So when did your sister begin to manifest her symptoms?" I inquired.

"It started during the Cattle Deaths," she explained. "As you can infer, my parents were in no condition to raise Irene or run the ranch, so the duties devolved on me. At the time, our cattle were dying by the thousands from the Cattle Death; we had to haul them with tractors to a huge pile in the center of the ranch, where we lit a bonfire that burned for weeks. One of the hands we brought on board was named Dylan—"

"Are you talking about me?" Irene asked, awake, yawning.

"We had been talking about a bovine viral epidemic, of course; but said yes just to make her happy."

"Yes," I admitted.

She yawned again, languidly, and volunteered, "I had a *peculiar* dream! I dreamt the ground was really porous, like...like, like pudding, and we were all standing up to our waists in it. Instead of walking to Baton Rouge, things were passing us by while we stood still—trees, buildings, even other people who also stood waist-deep in the ground. If you wanted to go anywhere you'd grab a balloon by a string and you could float around..."

"I had a dream I had to pee," said the old man, whose name was Perry. "So I woke up and now I have to pee!"

"Me too! Me too!" Irene exclaimed. She and Perry disappeared into the brush to perform their ablutions.

Nancy sidled up to me. "I have an insurance policy, just in case the healer doesn't cure my sister," she divulged.

"What's that?" I asked.

In lieu of a response she hiked her skirt up to her chest. Strapped around her belly were several rounds of basalt. “He doesn’t heal her and we all get blown sky-high,” she explained, as she released her skirt with her hands to pantomime an immense combustion.

“Isn’t that a little drastic?” said I.

“Well, if he only heals her halfway, I’ll only use half as much.”

That seemed like a steep price to pay for recidivism, even by American standards, so I resolved to get the basalt away from her at the earliest occasion.

They were a surprisingly resilient crew. We had marched for about fourteen hours the day before with few breaks. Each person made some vital contribution. For example, Perry was adept at catching lizards and mice, which Nancy roasted over a smokeless fire she had ignited from what seemed like sand and persistence. Irene had an eye for spotting moisture, like her ill-fated mother. I was in charge of logistics. In what direction should we head? At what pace should we march? Should Perry make a bladder stop or should we soldier on (soldier on)?

For breakfast we had a few strips from the snake Nancy had roasted the night before, as well as a splash of water that Irene had milked from a cactus. I did my best to hide the evidence of our encampment; then we struck out for another day’s march.

We had about an hour before the full intensity of the sun would be upon us. Because yesterday’s hike was so successful, I was highly confident we would make good time today, perhaps even reaching Houston. I walked first to set the pace. I could tell by their shadows whether they were keeping up with me or falling behind. Nancy had a tendency to get winded because she was so out-of-shape. Perry, on the other hand, tended to walk in a zigzag, so that slowed him down appreciably. I walked with Irene, who seemed to have momentarily suppressed her insistence that I bed her.

“I know you think I’m a perv and a sick-o-phat,” she acknowledged. “But I just *love* the human body. Growing up, you know, around all these cattle and horses with their genitals at eye-level just made me think of sex all the time. Dillie wasn’t even my first partner. He’s just the first guy I was caught with, and that was only because he complained that I was wearing him out.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder. “Bryan, what do you think the Healer is going to do? Is he going to change me so that shagging isn’t any fun? Is he going to change me so I *can’t* shag any more? What’s he going to do? How is he going to heal me? Oh, I really don’t want him to heal me that way!”

She seemed quite distraught, so I tried to think of some way to reassure her. “I don’t think he’s going to take sex away from you,” I said. “I think he’s going to give you something that you like even *better*.”

“Even *better*? Even *better*! Something I would like *even better* than sex? That would be awesome! I can’t wait to let him heal me now!” She began skipping ahead, chanting, “Better than sex! Better than sex!” with each step.

“Bryan, what’s that?” Nancy exclaimed, pointing before us, in the direction in which Irene was skipping. Ahead of us I could see a paved road and buildings.

“Irene, stop!” I exclaimed. Irene froze in place. I gestured to Nancy and Perry to stop and get down. Then I walked half-crouching to Irene. “Honey, go back to where your sister is,” I ordered. Irene quietly stole back beside Nancy and Perry. I stooped to my hands and knees and crawled through the brush until I reached the edge of the trees, where the paved road lay. On the far side of the paved road was a building, but I couldn’t see any evidence of humans, be they opiated child warriors or otherwise. I walked out onto the road to improve my view. More buildings; it wasn’t Houston, obviously, since you could spot Houston from miles away; but it looked like a little Texas hamlet. And in fact, on a rectangular sign hanging above the road I read the words:

### **Welcome to Malo Suerte**

“Malo Suerte! That’s the plague town!” Perry exclaimed when I broke the news to them.

I: I know that.

Irene: What are we going to do?

Perry: Did you see any Feds around?

I: No, the place looked pretty deserted.

Nancy: Did you see any sign of fire?

I: Nope.

Nancy: Usually they evacuate the town and burn it down. I wonder why they didn’t burn it.

Irene: So what are we going to do?

I: I think we should go into town. We need to check for provisions; maybe there’ll be a car.

Perry: Are you crazy? We go into town and we’ll catch the plague too!

I: How can we catch the plague if there’re no people left?

Perry: What are you, a dermatologist? You don’t know how you catch the plague!

Nancy: I say let’s vote on it.

I: Fair enough.

Nancy: Then I vote we go into town.

Irene: I vote the same.

I: Ditto

Perry: I vote you're a bunch of idiots!

I: Perry, if you don't think it's safe then just stay here.

Perry: You'll just infect me when you're done poken around the place. You might as well use my head as a cotton swab and stick it in the back of your throat.

I: Pass!

Now that we were confident we could walk through the town unmolested, we left the safety of the trees and walked down the center of the paved road toward the concentration of deserted buildings.

Perry: There must have been some looting.

I: Watcha mean?

Perry: Look at all the boarded-up windows.

He was right, for the windows on the building were covered with plywood and heavily secured with two-by-fours. The man from Malo Suerte had said nothing about looting when he was driven away from the town. I wondered what the looters were after.

Irene: What's that?

Nancy: What's what?

Irene: That sound! Shhh! I hear it again!

She cautioned with her hands to say "utter silence" (can you really utter silence?), so again we froze in place. She formed cups around her ears with her hands to sensitize her hearing. "That sound!" she exclaimed. "It sounds like someone crying..." She pointed to a boarded-up building.

Irene: Bryan, these buildings aren't boarded up to keep people out! They're boarded up to keep people in!

She and Nancy ran to the building and began attacking the plywood and lumber. Perry and I looked at each other, mystified, but nonetheless we joined in the assault. We managed to pry some of the two-by-fours away from the plywood, and then we pried the plywood away from the building. Behind the exposed window we saw four cadaverous faces pressed against the glass. Their skin was pasty and metallic; their eyes were sunken; one had a rivulet of blood coagulated beneath a nostril.

Perry: The plague! The plague!

Irene walked up to the window and pressed her hand on the glass side of one of the flattened faces. The eyes were trained on her hand. "They don't have the

plague,” she concluded. She turned around and faced us. “Shut up, Perry. They don’t have the plague. They were walled inside this building by some medievalist. We need to get them out.”

The window was nailed shut but we were able to pry it open. The four stricken occupants climbed out, chanting, “Thank you for saving us! Thank you for saving us!”

Irene: Perry, go get some water. Nancy, we need some blankets so they can rest. Bryan, can you find some food? You’d better find some tools as well so we can pry open the rest of these windows.

We dispersed on our errands. I found a hardware store and smashed the door open with a large rock. Inside I found some crowbars and hammers. Where to find food? I carried the tools back to where Irene was nursing our four survivors. Then I took one crowbar with me to find a restaurant or some other eating establishment. I didn’t have far to look, for alongside the road I found a pallet, and on the pallet there were crates and boxes strapped to keep them in place. A silk sheet lay atop the crates, with ropes attached to each corner. It was a parachute...I unlatched the parachute and exposed the spray-painted letters “LDS”. It was a Mormon Care Package! You had to wonder how bad the apocalypse would really be if it weren’t for the Mormons.

Using the crowbar I quickly removed the straps and unloaded a few crates. I rushed these back to Irene, who eagerly opened them.

“Look, Nancy!” she said. She held up several containers of chocolates, powdered milk, a medical kit, and a Book of Mormon. “Just what we need!”

“Come on, Perry,” I urged. He and I returned to the pallet, and we made several more trips to unload the supplies.

Then we returned to the task of dismantling the plywood. There were several dozen buildings with boarded-up windows, but not all contained survivors. In some homes there were no survivors at all. You could tell the instant the plywood came down. In other homes the air was foul from a corpse but there were survivors clamoring to get out. As the survivors described it, the Department of Health had no medical personnel who could diagnose a plagues from someone who was uninfected, so they simply boarded up the town and left.

Misery was rampant. There were those whose loved ones were stricken; others who had been trapped inside a home where the corpses grew fetid. Some suffered from illnesses that were not the plague. Others suffered injuries trying to defend the town from the Department of Health. All were severely dehydrated, delusional, traumatized. Irene and Nancy moved among them, dispensing medical treatment, food, water and sympathy.

Perry started a fire at the edge of town, and I procured a wheelbarrow from the hardware store. Then I walked from house to house, intoning lugubriously, "Bring out your dead!" to the occupants, as if I were a serf from fourteenth-century Marseilles.

There is nothing more gut-wrenching than wresting a woman from her husband's dead embrace, then scrubbing her with Mormon disinfectant and dusting her with white powder to ward off the infection. She is inconsolable. We place her in Irene's hands, whose kind words keep the grieving woman from dashing her head against the pavement. Meanwhile, I load the corpse onto the cart, along with his clothing, which must also be burned.

Some corpses were stiff with rigor-mortise; others were limp. Loading them onto the wheelbarrow was problematic, because they tended to roll off like logs or seep off like sacks. I wheeled the corpse down to the fire, where Perry inspected him for signs of life. Perry had an aptitude for distinguishing the living from the dead (which he attributed to having been near death on numerous occasions, but I suspected has more to do with him sticking the body with a pin). Twice he pulled a liver from the cart before I cast the body onto the flames. This corpse, however, had succumbed to the plague; the spirit had departed and no pinprick could animate it. Safe in our Mormon antiviral gear, Perry and I raised the body up and heaved it onto the fire. Over the crackling of the flames we heard his widow shriek and howl.

How do you feel clean again after such an ordeal? You throw your clothes into the flames and run down to the irrigation canal, where you scrub your flesh with harsh rocks and disinfectant. Once you've scrubbed your skin you fear you harbor germs in your fingernails, and you scrape them with rocks as well. Then your hair feels alive with parasites, so you submerge yourself beneath the water. You feel bacteria invade your nostrils, your lips, your tongue, the back of your throat. Your eyes are enflamed; you feel you would piss raw sewage. To each surface and orifice you bring the stones to bear. When you can no longer scrape for fear of drawing blood you leave the water and attendants dust you with the white powder. Can you swallow the powder? Can you inhale it? You hunger for the powder in every pore. And when you feel the plague is finally purged from your body, a rumor circulates that another corpse has been found and must be carted off to the bonfire; or you are needed to help in the makeshift hospital that has overtaken the hardware store. There you change dressings, dry a perspiring brow or help a woman sit up to better survive the paroxysms that choke her. Then you cannot unpeel your clothing fast enough, and it is down to the irrigation canal again for more scrubbing.

Nancy had enlisted the surviving townspeople of Malo Suerte in distributing the provisions, such as blankets and linens, from the Mormon Care Package. They sterilized water for cooking and cleaning, and prepared a simple meal. Then they graciously fêted us for coming to their rescue, though all the credit was Irene's for her temerity.

As we sat on the floor of a deserted grocery store (looted, no doubt by the Department of Health) eating Deseret peaches from large cans, one of the townspeople, whose name was Arun, confided, "We knew they were plagues the moment they arrived in town. They had all the symptoms, but they did their best to conceal them. It was a troupe of street performers, you know. They'd come into town and set up their wires and trapezes right on the roadside, and as you passed by you'd throw some bills into a hat. They'd just come from Desperation, a town a couple of miles from here. Because they wore masks and face paint, it disguised the symptoms, but you could definitely tell something was amiss by the scent of almonds they gave off. Right, Meesha?"

Meesha, who sat on the floor beside him, nodded her agreement.

"Last Friday," he continued, "they finished setting up their equipment and started their first show. Not much else happens in Malo Suerte, so we were eager to see them perform, even brought out chairs and coolers for drinks and food.

"But after the show started, you could really tell they weren't performing that well. One would leap from a platform and the other wouldn't catch him. The lady juggling the torches set her hair on fire and almost burned down their tent. It was starting to look like a horror show."

Meesha was impatient to contribute, so as Arun paused she interjected, "It was a horrible thing. They were swinging in the sky on their trapezes when one who was holding the other let his hands slip, and the other fell to the ground with a big thud." She demonstrated a pancake landing with her hands. "We rushed to see if the woman on the ground was okay, and you would not believe what we saw. Her mask had fallen off her face and she was covered in boobles. Just then her partner collapsed to the ground as well, and you could see behind his face paint that he also was covered in boobles. And the rest of them began collapsing also, falling from their platforms to the ground like some kind of blizzard."

"Some of us tried to help them," said Arun, "but the disease had progressed too far; we could only ease their suffering before they died."

"Most of the townspeople ran like hell," Meesha added.

"Andrew Carson who used to work for the forestry service decided to call the Department of Health. We were quite relieved when they arrived from Houston in their big black vehicles. They ordered us inside our homes as a precautionary

measure, but when we were all inside they began boarding up the homes! They warned us if we tried to escape we would be shot on sight. We banged on the wood, begging for help until our strength left us, or until many of us succumbed to the ravages of the plague.”

“It was criminal what those bastards did,” Meesha exclaimed. “What kind of country is this?”

“We have to report them!” someone suggested.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Meesha admonished. “The instant they learn we have escaped, don’t you think they will return to finish us off? I recommend we change the town’s name and pretend this never happened.”

“What about Andrew Carson? He’s the one that called the damn gmnt. You think we should lynch him?”

“That’s all we need, another dead body,” said Meesha.

“It ain’t his fault. Besides, he’s already dead from the plague.”

“Let’s call the town Knock Harder,” one person exclaimed, alluding to their internment behind the plywood and boards.

“What about Stick-Up?” someone else volunteered. “Because the next time I see someone from the Department of Health I’m goen to stick my gun up—”

“What about Irene?” said I.

Hoots and hallelujahs. “Let’s call the town Irene! Irene, Texas!”

“Irene what?” said Irene, as she had just happened by.

“We’re goen to name the town after you! Irene, Texas!”

“Why don’t you call it Something Good Will Happen?” she suggested.

“That’s a phrase! You can’t name a town after a phrase!”

“He did! He wanted to name the town Stick-Up!” someone objected, pointing to the man whose idea it had been.

“Call it Irene,” Irene acquiesced, to keep the peace. “Bryan, can I speak with you?”

“Sure,” I said. Irene gathered Nancy, Perry, and me and guided us to an empty room in a nearby building, where we were all alone.

“I wanted to tell you all,” she prefaced, “I don’t need to see the Healer of Baton Rouge any more. I’m already healed! I found what’s better than sex!”

“What?” said Perry, alarmed.

“I found something that I want more than sex. I want to stay here and help the people who live in this town. I want to dress their wounds, dry the salt off their cheeks and soothe their cares. I realized that having sex wasn’t giving any one anything; instead, when someone’s lying helpless on a sweat-soaked blanket,



too pained to talk, that's when I'm really needed. I've decided I'm going to stay here and take care of the people of Malo Suerte."

"Praise the Lord!" said Nancy. "This is a joyous day. You pray and pray for a healing and it comes when you're not even expecting it." She enveloped Irene in her arms and gave her a hug that must have drained her of oxygen.

"I'm staying too, then. Your home is my home, sister," said Nancy.

"Then I'm staying too," said Perry. "I'm going to keep an eye on you, in case you back-slide." It sounded as if he'd be waiting eagerly for her the occasion, but in her gracious state Irene took his words in good spirit.

Later, I pulled Nancy away from the group and whispered to her, "I don't think you'll need your insurance policy any more, now that Irene is healed."

"No, I suppose you're right," she agreed. She raised her skirt and extricated herself from the basalt girdle she wore. "Here you go," she said, setting it in my hands.

According to one of the townspeople there was a train that ran through town on the way from the West Coast to the East Coast. It stopped for a few minutes at Malo Suerte, although the visit was brief since there was nothing to load or unload. Nonetheless there was sufficient time for me to pry open a door and sneak inside a railcar.

I said my goodbyes to my companions and the good people of Malo Suerte, and then hid beside the railroad tracks until I could hear the train approach. It coasted to a stop, long enough for me to force entry into a car, slide the door shut, and find a cozy niche in which to insert myself. Then, as the train began to inch forward I closed my eyes and laid my head down to sl—

## CHAPTER 10

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# A DAY ONLY POE COULD PEN

I could tell by the number of bladders I emptied that the train had overshot Houston by many hours. Night grew into day, which reverted to night again. The train sped onward with no diminution in speed or variance in direction, far past the destination I had hoped for. By now of course I was inured to my ever-shifting fate, left in the hands of some large, uncontrollable machine, like a fatalistic centrifugal force. Once the train stopped and the door opened I would be surrounded by Roman Centurions from the second century A.D.; or the door would open and Daupin would stroll into the car, accusing me of complicity in the murders on the Rue Morgue. What awaited me beyond the doors was almost an after-effect, an anticlimax. It was completely out of my hands.

I spent my time exploring my dark container. Evidently I shared the railcar with a family of rats and several bulky engines strapped to wooden pallets. Why had I not broken into the harem car, or the car that supplied the storybook man's chocolate factory? Why did I happen to break into the rat and engine car?

One nice thing about traveling in oblivion (as I was) was that I was completely off the radar of whoever was seeking me. Ever since my rooftop bath with the twins in San Francisco, ever since the aborted eastern flight aboard the chopper to escape Lawrence and his fliers, I felt I was unwatched, incognito. What would it take, I wondered, to bust out on the other side of this pursuit and chase my chas-

ers? If only doing sit-ups could give me the answers; if only doing sit-ups would eradicate plagues, remedy ecological disasters or put children into crèches instead of armies. If only sit-ups could bestow miracles. If only sit-ups would bring me back to Char, I'd do sit-ups until my muscles snapped like guitar strings, and my rib cage sparked flames. Just in case, just in case, there was no end to the sit-ups I performed while the train rolled on.

It was night when I started to sense the train slowly losing speed, and then after gradual deceleration it came to a halt. Since I knew Daupin awaited me at the train stop with gendarmes, I hopped off the train early. We all know it was the bloody orangutan that did it, anyway.

I stole into the rail yard; my plans were:

- Find some place to hide, out-of-sight
- Reconnaissance—where the heck was I?
- Find some water (famished) and groceries (starving)

I was in luck with the first item, for as you would expect of a rail yard, there were crates, piles, and stacks of things everywhere. *Hie thee to a really tall spot*, I told myself. There was a water tower nearby, so as agile as an orangutan I climbed the ladder adjacent to the tower until I reached the top, where I perched myself on the sloping surface. From this vantage point I could see the entire rail yard. The sight was mind numbing—vast pens of livestock all bleating, mooing, shite-ing, and peshing; silos overflowing with grains. You'd never know there was a drought or a famine in the rest of the country. The livestock was herded, slaughtered, rendered, and packaged in an endless assembly line that would have made Henry Ford proud. Yet another reason not to want to be a cow. Grain flowed into huge mills and vats and ovens and emerged as a plenitude of loaves. It looked like it should have some kind of German name to it—*der überschüssige Ausrüstung*, for example (kick myself for not learning German).

I also descried armed guards with vicious dogs straining their wrists (the guards' wrists, not the dogs'). I had a feeling the guards and dogs would bode me ill. There were trucks lined up outside the bakeries and meat-packaging plants; conveyor belts loaded the caravan with groceries, and chutes pumped frothy white milk into tankers. That's where I should hie myself next, so I could quickly leave the rail yard, escape the scrutiny of the guards, and find some way to head back west.

Wait a minute! Eejit! Why leave and find a way back home when I could just take the next westbound train? I followed the rail line with my eye to see if I

could detect where the trains did a one hundred eighty degree turn and headed back out of the yard. The track formed a huge crescent; it would be a simple matter for me to creep to the far end of the crescent, where the empty railcars were hitched up to trains that pulled them west and homeward.

Flying would be the easiest way to get me to the other end of the tracks, especially since I was already perched atop the water tower; but damn Darwin! I hadn't evolved with wings. There was nothing left but to descend the ladder again, and walk as evasively as possible across the rail yard, avoiding guards and dogs.

\* \* \* \*

Food and bevvvy, I reminded myself, as I climbed down the ladder. Deseret canned peaches from the Mormon stockpiles had been very tasty two days ago, but they had already worked their way through my system. Once again I was in luck, for wasn't I amidst the largest amassing of groceries on the planet? Before climbing aboard the next westbound train I needed to grab some provisions.

Once my feet touched ground I assumed the homo erectile gait of half-walk, half-crouch to avoid detection. I could have dragged my knuckles on the ground, but did not. I shuffled my way to the caravan of trucks so I could pilfer a jug of milk and a loaf of bread, two-thirds of a healthy Khayam breakfast. Richard III was a shuffler, I remembered. "Why I, in this weak, piping time of peace have no delight to piss away the time." *Blah blah blah*.

I sidled up to a truck laden with puffy loaves of bread in shiny plastic bags.

*Which one of you wants to become my digestive product?* I asked the bread. Unable to decide I chose the left-most loaf (see Barth, John) but bloody hell, the instant I raised the loaf into the air a guard dog began to bark, as if I were Nosferatu or something. Why couldn't the dog just sit around licking his bullocks? Why couldn't the guards? I know if I had a choice between sniffing around a rail yard and licking my bullocks where my mouth would be. Elbows up, knees up, I began sprinting down the line of trucks, bread in hand. The chorus of barks increased, and added to it was the sound of guards shouting orders and obscenities. As I ran alongside the trucks, I could see in the reflection of the side mirrors the rapid approach of man and beast behind me; beneath the truck beds, between the wheels of the tires I spotted more teams approaching. Then they set the dogs loose; I could tell by the rapid cadence of quadruped legs striking the gravel. I knew I could outrun the guards but not the animals. I had no place to go but up. I leapt onto a maze of scaffolding and climbed, hand over hand, until I reached a

metal chute. I quickly dove into the chute headfirst, and had my second bloody hell because a channel of white froth carried me rapidly through the chute. There was nothing to grab I couldn't slow my plunge at all. It was as if I had been vacuumed into the plumbing and flushed down the pipes. And then the chute emptied inside the hold of a tanker truck and I was plunged beneath the water.

I thought it was water but when I came to the surface for air I realized, in fact, that I had been washed inside the tank of a milk truck. Could this happen to anyone else but me? The milk was chilling.

More milk continued to stream in through the chute and the hatch until the level rose dangerously close to the top of the tank. I insinuated myself into the thin pocket of air where I watched the chute withdraw and the hatch cover shut down over the opening and spin to a hermetic seal. Then a slight oscillation of the surface of the milk let me know that the truck's engine had started, and finally an agitation of the surface was evidence that the truck was in motion.

Make a note: To escape rail-yard dogs, immerse yourself in milk. I checked with my hands to see what I had about my person (I was buoyed to the surface by its density). I had lost the crowbar borrowed from the hardware store in Malo Suerte. Also missing was Nancy's basalt belt. I still had the things in my pockets, but nothing that would help me break out of the tank. I filled my lungs with air and then dove to the bottom of the tank to feel for my tools. Despite several trips and thorough exploration, the tools were gone. The bread bobbed merrily at the surface, safe in its plastic bag. I tore into the bag and hurriedly devoured the loaf. What to wash it down with?

Why not try to unscrew the hatch cover by hand? It was worth a try. I swam to the rear of the tank and found a handle on the hatch cover. Why was there a handle on the inside of the tank? Were they expecting people to be trapped inside? It seemed like a peculiar contingency. Nonetheless I was grateful for it. I could not twist it loose on the first try, so I tried to gain some momentum by spinning my body while I twisted the cover. Still no joy. Finally I wedged my legs into the back wall of the tank, and thus anchored I was able to get leverage, and the hatch cover slowly gave way. When I finally released it, I pushed it through the opening. Then I sank all the way to the bottom of the tank, where I thrust upward with my legs; and had enough velocity to push my shoulders through the opening.

Instantly I felt the force of the wind, for the truck must have been traveling very fast. Girding myself against the cold I pushed my body through the opening the rest of the way, birthed yet again, atop a speeding tanker.

I lay on the surface of the tank for a few moments to catch my breath, and wring the milk out of my clothes and hair. I watched the road and realized I would have to get the driver to stop the truck. It was traveling too fast for me to leap off without further harm. I lifted the heavy lid and used all my strength to heave it off the truck, toward the driver's side of the road, where it struck the road surface with a loud clamor. A second later the driver slammed the brakes, and I would have been thrown off had I not held for dear life onto the circular edge of the opening. The truck skidded for about thirty meters and came to an uneasy halt. The driver opened the door to inspect the downed hatch cover, so I slid down the tank on the passenger side, and at a propitious moment I fell to the ground, looked beneath the truck to make sure I was undetected, and stole off into the trees that lined the roadside.

*With my luck, I thought, I'll be overtaken by a gang of cats who'll lick me to death.*

As I cleared the trees and emerged on the other side, I could see a row of tenement buildings, perhaps twenty stories high. The moon illuminated some details. Many of the windows in the buildings were broken; some were repaired with boards or covered by sheets. There were balconies festooned with articles of clothing, and between the buildings, like vast arteries, ropes were suspended, sporting linens, shirts, knickers, pants, and vast dresses. Over the noise of the nearby traffic, I could hear domestic sounds: infants crying, adults yelling shut up! arguments over it's mine! it's mine! The area was filled with two-footers; many sped around the compound with dilapidated bicycles or chased each other in circles; most stared at me sullenly, their thumbs in their mouths, half-clad in outsized, tattered clothing. Through the windows that weren't boarded televisions flickered and fag-ends glowed orange; more sullen eyes stared from the dark concealment of the flats. These were the welfare queens of the East Coast.

I found a water hose and did my best to wash the milk off me. It was beginning to congeal and felt rather sticky. The two-footers approached me with trepidation and curiosity. When they were close enough, I sprayed them with the hose and they ran away, giggling. Then a stern voice roared from one of the flats, and the children withdrew to a wider circumference. At this point I figured my best bet was to approach one of the occupants and parley. For some reason the paramount thing on my mind was a hot shower. I chose a door at random and walked up to it.

Knock, knock.

"What?"

"Sorry to bother, but I just had an accident on the road and would like to borrow your loo to clean up."

"What?"

"May I borrow your loo?"

There was a pause, and then a cacophonous creaking of springs and wood, as if a mast were about to snap off a frigate. I heard a whisper, the slapping of feet on the floor, and saw the door slowly open.

"Thanks," I said, stepping into the room. "I—" the sight robbed me of words. Inside were even more children in gradients of squalor: in cribs, in diapers, in pajamas, in gowns, on the floor, on chairs, shouting, crying, vomiting, pissing, laughing, fighting. And in the center of the room sat a vast woman, nursing a child at either teat, and with a belly that suggested more were imminent (children, not teats).

"A ma-*an*!" she exclaimed, suddenly becoming animated. She pulled the children away from her pendulous breasts and they immediately started to wail (again, the children).

"A ma-*an*!" I heard echo from an adjoining flat. "A ma-*an*!" emanated from another. Since when did the word *man* have two syllables? Nonetheless the air was filled with the groaning of springs and wood, the wailing of children deprived of suck, and the slamming of doors as all the women within earshot of my hostess abandoned their domiciles and rushed in to see me. Soon I was engulfed in a sea of ponderous women who grabbed my hair, pulled at my water-soaked clothes, and took liberties with my private parts.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" I objected, to no avail. I was actually quite relieved when a man and a woman wearing laboratory coats pushed their way through the crowd and shot me with an electric prod.

\* \* \* \*

I awoke in a room that was white on white. OMG, they've deprived me of seeing colors! I mentally overdramatized, just for fun. I was naked, lying on my back, seemingly shaven from neck to foot. When I tried to get up I found I was strapped in my supine position. Someone with a surgical mask, headgear and gloves was studiously measuring me with a tape. "Nipple to nipple, thirty centimeters; nipple to navel, forty centimeters; nipple, three centimeters radius; left larger than right; navel depth, two point five centimeters, radius three centimeters," she dryly intoned, probably for the benefit of a microphone. She (for it was

a she) was very interested in the “nipple to” measurements, a pretty odd way to triangulate a person.

She clinically seized my genitals and began announcing genital dimensions (flaccid) and I was strapped in such a way that I couldn’t evade her. This is why genitals should be retractable. Nonetheless I soon realized her interest was not prurient, so I begrudgingly succumbed to her survey. Once the exterior was measured, she began to measure certain cavities, their distance from other body parts, their declension, even the temperature. I felt as if she were preparing me for someone’s plate. Then the experiments became freakier. She pinched metal clips to my fingertips and sent increasingly stronger jolts of electricity through my body; then she would measure me for tumescence and draw the temperature of my cavities. She splashed ice-cold water in my face, and repeated her measurements; she strapped a rubber collar to my neck and inflated it until I passed out; when I recovered, she was again measuring my tumescence and the temperature of my cavities.

Why was she so fascinated with girth? Girth, girth, girth. I first thought she had a lisp but “gerse” wasn’t a word, so it was back to girth. Girth was her mirth.

I wanted to ask her what her major had been in college to earn such a sinecure, but I was loath to irk her. For once I kept my mouth shut. Now I could see what kind of inducement was required to keep me couth.

Then the clinician opened a toolbox stocked with probes, calipers, and clamps, as well as other devices, and her operations became so invasive that I focused my mental camera elsewhere, returning to the day spent with Char at Hoover Dam, assiduously reconstructing the words to Ipanema—

*Masked and gloved and stern and pallid*

*The girl with electric wires goes probing*

I must have been penance for an entire population, like the loathed, feces-smeared child in the story of Omelas. “I hope you’re having a good time at my expense!” I mentally overdramatized, but it wasn’t as much fun this time.

The experiments continued for hours in a methodical, monotonous fashion. I would run out of fingers were I to tally the permutations of each step.

Puncture subject’s left arm with a two-millimeter pin

Use caliper to measure subject’s degree of tumescence

Use thermometer to measure the temperature of subject’s cavities

Puncture subject’s right arm...



Insert thumb into subject's left eye socket until the first knuckle is buried  
(Note: some subjects have deeper eye sockets, so if subject registers no response, continue until the second knuckle is buried)  
Use caliper to measure subject's degree of tumescence  
Use thermometer to measure the temperature of subject's cavities  
Insert thumb into subject's right eye socket...

O fraptuous joy! Two other besmocked retainers entered the room; my clinician briefly acknowledged them and began gathering her machines and instruments while they unstrapped me and placed me into a wheelchair. I tested my limbs and found them unresponsive. Had there been a gust of wind it would have lifted me, like a kite, high into the stratosphere. The retainers wheeled me through the double doors and down a long corridor, into a smaller chamber. Here they trained a plume of hot water on me, and proceeded to scrub every surface raw with coarse brushes.

How many showers would I have to take during the apocalypse?

Afterward, I sat in a jet of warm air, which gradually dried me. *No! No! No! Just leave me here*, I admonished them, to no avail. They powdered me with a light talcum, draped a robe over me, and then wheeled me before a mirror. Then I got the full cosmetic treatment: white face paint, exaggerated, almost vaginal red lips, feline eyes. I looked like King Louie Quatorze in drag at a masquerade. Finally, when I couldn't possibly be any more Elizabethan, they flicked off the vanity lights and wheeled me out again.

As we rolled down the long corridor, I was left to wonder if King Louie Quatorze could be Elizabethan; after all, he and Queen Elizabeth hailed from different countries and were half a century apart. Now was no time to take poetic license.

Where were we headed, with me in such fine costume? We wheeled me through another set of double doors into a cacophonous chamber. Voices emanated from all corners: beseeching, objecting, insisting, imploring, resisting, succumbing, rejoicing, cursing; and then beseeching again.

"Where should we put him?" my orderlies asked a woman seated at a desk.

She glanced at a scoreboard on the wall that advertised a profusion of numbers. "Stall nineteen," she replied, using a long stylus to check that stall off the scoreboard.

They wheeled me about twenty meters farther, where an enormous woman lay in a bed; a partition on either side of the bed offered a modicum of privacy from the narrow reed of a man who was servicing a woman in an adjacent stall.

“OMG!” she exclaimed, in a drug-addled voice. “A *ma-an!*” Before I could react she hitched her toe into the wheelchair and pulled me toward her. I fell into her waiting arms, inert. My retainers removed the robe and switched on a television set, which began to display pornographic images. The woman was expert in conjugal acts, for she began to explore me with her mouth and fingers, urging me to succumb. I was not in the mood to have resisted a dozen beautiful women only to surrender my moral fidelity to a breeder. Although I could still not move my limbs, I could focus all my energies to de-tumescere, so no matter how she chose to stimulate or arouse me, I did not respond.

This passivity alarmed my retainers; at first, they added their efforts to the woman’s, facilitating movements and poses that her bulk would not allow, but eventually their frustrations grew and they shouted to the woman at the scoreboard that I was a “limper.”

Immediately my bed partner turned on me, and with an energy equal to her earlier passion she began flailing me with her arms, crushing me beneath her weight, and pummeling with her knees the same instrument she once caressed. The orderlies did their best to extricate me but required the assistance of the scoreboard lady before I was free. To punctuate the occasion, the scoreboard lady gave me a jolt with her electric bar; and as the attendants set me in the wheelchair, she continued zapping me each time she saw my tremens subside. All eyes were upon me as I was wheeled away. A rivulet of drool trickled down my chin; or was it a bloody nose, or perhaps cerebral fluid? Who knew?

The orderlies were in a hurry to dispose of me, perhaps fearing an insurrection; so they wheeled me in great haste through a maze of corridors, taking each turn on two wheels. We entered a freight elevator and began a slow descent. One of the attendants covered me with my robe, probably to conceal the damage the woman had inflicted. My list of people not to piss off was growing; funny thing was, I didn’t know whom not to piss off until I had already done it and suffered the consequences.

When the elevator stopped, we rolled down another dark corridor, and then came to rest before a closed door. The door was quickly unlocked and opened, and the retainers pushed the wheelchair through. Not for the first time a door slammed shut on me, leaving me in dark confinement.

Eyes slowly adjust to darkness. Ears, needing no acclimation, detected the cadence of another person’s breath, so I called out, “Hello?”

“I wouldn’t want to be you,” responded my companion, a male voice.

“I can’t argue with that,” I allowed.

“You a limper?”

"Yep," I replied. "Just this once. Under normal circumstances..."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be you," he repeated. "If they can't use you as a breeder they use you for experiments."

"What kind of experiments?"

"Like organ grafting. The last guy they threw in here, they grafted a female organ on him. They wanted to see if he would shag himself to death. Another guy, I forget his name, they sliced his willie down the middle to see if the left side would get more erect than his right based on which side of the brain they stimulated. This is a research clinic for the Department of Overpopulation. The only reason I'm alive," said the man, "is that I'm hyper-ejaculatory."

"Hyper what?"

"Hyper-ejaculatory. I can service about twenty breeders an hour. Do you want me to demon—"

"No thanks!" I quickly interjected. "I thought only women talked about their organs this much."

"The idea is to increase the yield. They want to breed women who have shorter gestation periods, and men with faster insemination rates. They've got women who can push a baby out every four months. They've even implanted, two, four extra breasts on women to keep them lactating. They're experimenting with me to see why I'm so spermatic. They want everyone to be fecund."

We should have a fecund weekend. "Why can't they just use artificial insemination? A lab has to be more efficient than a human."

"Don't you know? It's cheaper to just use people. You keep them around for a few years until their yield drops; then you ship them off to a labor camp. Besides, you've got to convince the ladies to haul the kids around for five or six years, and the women're more likely to do that with a human daddy."

"Who's they?"

"The government, obviously. Didn't you see the projects when you came in? Huge breeding grounds. Women have ten, fifteen babies, like it's the eighteenth century; only, to keep them docile the government uses opium."

"But what's the point? Why breed all these children? You know, where I live, in Tijuana, there's a Zero Child Policy so women can't even have kids."

My companion sidled up to me and whispered, "I'll tell you exactly what the plot is. The government's planning a Malthusian holocaust. Soon the population will be so strained it'll pour over the borders. That's how the U.S. took over Mexico and Canada. Next they'll swamp Central America. Anyone can defeat an army of soldiers, but who can resist an onslaught of the masses?"

“How do you know all this?” I asked, incredulous. “You’d be surprised at how many conspiracy theories I’ve heard. There’s always a they involved, and it’s usually the government.”

“I used to be an under-secretary at the Department of Overpopulation. I’m an economist by trade, but I fell out of favor because of my involvement in the Amish gene experiments,” he spoke the latter part of the sentence in a lowered voice. “Let me ask you a question. You said you were from Tijuana, right?”

“Yes.”

“How did you get here?”

“It’s a convoluted story, but Tijuana to Fresno, Fresno to Sacramento, Sacramento to Houston—no, Sacramento to San Francisco to Houston, Houston to here.”

“Then you’ve passed right through the government’s supply chain. Didn’t you see it?”

“No.”

“Okay. Disease has killed all the livestock, except for the enclaves like the Aryan Nation, which occupies the central valley of California. These enclaves produce livestock and grain, and sell their surplus for munitions. Why do they need munitions? To keep the Feds at bay. The Feds buy munitions from the industrialists with worthless currency. Opium growers trade their product in return for children to guard their lands against raids. Financiers serve as proxies for the deals, so the parties never know whom they’re dealing with.”

“So you’re saying the Feds have let the country descend into chaos just so they could send grain gratis to feed a mass of children...”

“No, the government didn’t orchestrate the chaos. That would imply that someone was clever enough to foresee how society would break down. None of our computer simulations were able to predict what would happen after the government defaulted on the federal debt. Who would have guessed the country would have reverted to feudalism? No, the government just observed the chaos and exploited it, playing one group off against the other. There’s a bureau for everybody: a Bureau of Worship, a Bureau of Overpopulation, a Bureau for the Exploitation of the Bourgeoisie.”

“How does the government plan to exploit the bourgeoisie?”

“Well, the government learned you can’t command creativity; you can’t coerce it. You can only reward it, bribe it, and sedate it. The government needs the creativity of the bourgeoisie to keep the factories running; once they’re no longer needed, they will be forced into labor camps, or assimilated into the breeder pool, or just exterminated. Why do you think the Zero Child Policy was

instituted? He wants you to be obedient little capitalists, dutiful consumers and producers. But you'll have no joy, no purpose, no *raison d'être*."

"He?"

"The funny thing is, you bourgeoisie think you're the top of the food chain, the hunters, whereas you're really the herd."

"You seem awfully proud of yourself," I said.

"Bear in mind, I was just a low-level functionary. I know the title 'under-secretary' sounds so glamorous but I was the proverbial cog."

I felt animation return to my limbs. Then I had the urge to fall upon my companion and strangle him. Start with the low-level functionaries and work your way up. In the last several weeks I had seen hundreds of faces of those who had suffered from what this man and his departments and agencies had done; but I stopped myself—if there was anything that could expiate this man's sins, no matter how grievous, I figured, it was captivity at the research clinic.

"I have one question for you," I said, trying to be congenial. "Is the prison food any good? Please don't tell me it's bread and milk."

\* \* \* \*

The next day I was reunited with my clothes and possessions. My Malo Suerte wardrobe was neatly cleaned and pressed, and my pocket miscellanea were stored in a bag, undisturbed. I took a long shower to wash the face paint and other contaminants off, then Ned (my cell-mate) and I sat down for a sumptuous breakfast, the best meal I had eaten in ages. We played a game of air chess, since we had no board, and called out positions to each other to visualize where the pieces lay. This worked for the first nine moves, until we began to dispute whether his bishop had landed atop one of his own pawns. Then we started the game over, to see how many moves we could make before our memories conflicted.

There was a knock on the cell door and Ned retreated beneath his bunk. The door opened and an attendant with a handheld entered. He called into the cell, "Barry?"

"No Barry here," I replied.

The attendant looked at me, glanced down at his handheld, then back at me. "Nope. It's you. Says so right here," handheld brandished for proof.

"Are you sure you don't mean *Ned*?" I asked. Why pick me when a low-level functionary would do?

"No!" Ned remonstrated, with a burst of conviction. "It's you, Barry."

I: Are you *sure* it's not Ned?

Ned: No, it's *you*, Barry.

Attendant: Let me double-check.

Ned, bouncing up and down on his bunk with each declamation: Barry! Barry! Barry!

I, loudly, over Ned's strident Barrys: But I'm *not* Barry! My name is Bryan. Are you *sure* you don't mean Ned?

Attendant, as loudly: No, I'm—

But he never finished his objection, for the handheld he proffered as evidence was lodged like a perverse metallic smile in his throat. He staggered backward, waving his arm desperately as futile antennae. An instant later here came the cavalry, swarming through the half-open door. *Aaah!* Sharp jolt in my neck. I raised my hand to feel where the pain was and pulled out a tiny, feathered dart. Hot liquid channeled through my veins. The cavalry piled on, body on body, beating me with hand, foot, knee and stick.

I, with bravado: Come on, you pussies! Is that the best you can do?

As the blows subside, they one by one climb off me, adjust their uniforms, smooth their hair, massage their bruised knuckles. I am suffused with filial love for each of them.

I: You guys are great, man! I love ya! Come here and give me a hug. Did my face bruise your knuckles? Sorry! My bad!

I am strapped into a wheelchair with plastic bands. "Wheelchair races!" I exclaim, but am not seconded. "I love ya, Ned!" say I.

Ned is silent, curled in the fetal position in his bunk. We roll out of the room, down corridors, in and out of lifts.

"Hello, corridor!" I shout out to the corridor. "Hello, lift!" I greet convivially.

We stop at a set of double doors, where there is a sign that read, "Vivisection Theater."

"Theater? Will there be hand puppets? Do we get to dress up?" I ask. My legs serve as battering rams to send us through the double doors. We roll to a table in the center of the room. I am unstrapped, lifted out of the wheelchair, and lain on the table, where I am again tethered. "Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you," I repeat to the withdrawing cavalry. "Thank you squared! Thank you cubed! Thank you [I pause to think of the right word] quadratic!"

From my horizontal angle I espy a balcony that overlooks the table. There sit a mix of men and women in white laboratory smocks. "Hand puppets!" I exult to them, but they are taciturn, unmoved. Then voilà, hand puppets, or rather head puppets, materialize above me, hovering like party balloons, as if they could waft away on a single jet of oxygen.

The head puppets wear plastic visors to cover their eyes and surgical masks to cover their mouths. *No mask or visor for me?* I mouth. Rather than reply they gird themselves with macabre devices: drills, circular saws, meat grinders, pincers, hand torches. They fill the room with a pneumatic whirr.

"I'd hate to have you lot operate on me," I joke. Then I feel a rupture of molecules as the machinery bears down on me. An instant later the head puppets disperse, their equipment falls to the ground and spins, grinds and clatters across the floor like mechanical rats. Then I see the cords and tubes wrap around the necks of the head puppets and pull them to the ceiling, where they are suspended from the lights. They swing metronomically, their instruments entangled in their white lab smocks; the flame-thrower spews a plume of orange and black that soon engulfs them. I quickly scale the tubes from which they hang, inches ahead of the flames, and leap into the balcony where the taciturn watchers shriek and flee as surgical instruments are flung into their nether limbs. Like Hop-Frog, I laugh uproariously.

I follow the fleeing crowd through a pair of doors that leads us back to the clinic proper. From there I take stairs, two at a time, and charge down corridors too fast for the guards and orderlies to react. I return to the cell, where I find Ned still in his cot, duct tape wrapped around his mouth.

"Hello, Ned!" I greet, in an excess of enthusiasm. I approach him, and cradle his head in my hands. Ned's eyes speak terror. I plant a kiss over his taped mouth, and note with wry satisfaction that a puddle of urine darkens the cot beneath him. No time to toy with him. I quickly change into my street clothes and evacuate the cell.

There were few windows in the clinic, but I found one and oriented which way, up or down, I needed to head to reach ground level. It was up. I ran to the fire exit, taking the stairs several at a time. On the ground floor there was door with a sign that read, "Emergency Exit Only—Alarm sounds when door is opened". I pushed it open but no alarm sounded. Never trust signs.

Nearby I saw the row of tenement buildings, the stand of trees, and the road. I ran through the trees until I reached the road. There I could see a dent in the tar where the tanker lid had landed and the long skid marks from where the truck had braked to a halt. Standing at the roadside, I waited for cars to pass and stuck out my thumb, the universal sign for "Fleeing scientific experiments. Please get me out of here."

The first few cars passed me without hesitation, but a sedan with darkened windows pulled over. I ran to the front of the car to talk to the driver, but the window stayed stubbornly closed. Instead, the rear door opened for me, so in I

went. I was the only one in the rear seat, and an interior glass panel separated me from whoever sat in the front seat.

When I closed the door, the car pulled away from the shoulder. As we picked up speed, I looked behind me, at the vanishing sight of the tenements and the clinic. Then I looked forward and tried to spot the driver through the dark glass panel.

"Thanks a lot for the ride," I said. "You can't imagine how grateful I am to get away from that place."

"You're welcome, Bryan," said a detached voice from the front of the car, "but we think we have a good idea how grateful you must be."



## CHAPTER 11



# A SHOWER DOESN'T CLEAN EVERYTHING

Neither the driver nor I ventured another word for many miles. I was relieved to see that, despite the fact the driver knew my name, that knowledge was not connected to the clinic, for we continued to increase our distance from it without any effort on the driver's part to return me. I decided on a line of questioning I hoped would uncover whether my driver meant me harm or safe passage.

"How did you know my name?" I asked, breaking the silence.

The detached voice replied, "There are many things we know about you. Some things you do not know yourself."

"Who is *we*?"

"At the moment, I speak on my own behalf. But *we* also stands for many others."

Thanks for the English lesson, I thought.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"We sift through billions of transactions on tens of thousands of heterogeneous computer systems daily. We look for statistical anomalies, values out-of-bound. This allowed us to track your movements. A break-in at the rail yard seems like an isolated occurrence to others, but to us it is a single marker in a trail of breadcrumbs. No one can match our data sniffing, not even the federal government. For example, did you know the intake clerk failed to swipe your fin-

gerprints when you were admitted to the research center? To cover her mistake, she swiped the prints of a truck driver who stopped by the facility to report a defective hatch on his tanker. His name was Barry; so the clinic reported they had a man named Barry in their custody, and not you. Your presence completely escaped the government's attention."

"How did you figure it out, then?"

"Because of the quantity of Pacifier™ they administered to you to sedate you. You required five times the regular dosage. The materials requisition was registered in the clinic's computer system, and our data sniffer software picked it up. It was a red flag, a necessary but not sufficient condition to warrant our further scrutiny. It was anomalous enough for us to install an alert on the clinic's computer system. Bear in mind that these anomalies occur millions of times a day on thousands of systems, so the critical factor is to know how to filter out the noise, the false positives.

"The second alert was triggered when you failed to service the breeder. Insemination statistics are logged, and for the first time in several years the clinic identified a non-donor, a *limper*. Combined, those two incidents were necessary and sufficient for us to probe deeper. We knew we had to act quickly when we saw you were scheduled for experimentation. It was time to collect you before you were irreparably damaged."

I guess if I were reparably damaged it would be okay to let them experiment. "So why do you care about me?" I asked. "The world is embroiled in havoc and millions are worse off than I am. What's so important about me?"

"Is it not odd that the only person who doesn't know who you are is you?"

"Whatever," I replied, my frustration growing.

Voice: Bryan, what is, or was, your occupation before your odyssey began?

I: My friend Mark and I worked as cryptographers.

Voice: Is it not ironic that you are gifted in making known things secret but have no gift to make secret things known? Your craft fails you.

I, demurring: I don't know. I seem to get people to tell me their secrets.

Voice: Yes, but it is an imperfect *modus operandi*. You don't learn things when you need them, and only when it is too late to capitalize on the knowledge. For instance, you permit yourself to be hostaged by a succession of protagonists so you can somehow let the truth of your identity effervesce from their lips. It was imperative for you to learn why federal forces were seeking you, for they obviously meant you harm. Yet not once did you explore that connection.

I, in rising indignation: Whatever! So what if I can't read tealeaves or goat entrails. I never pretended to be a clairvoyant or a mystic or anything. I never

asked for people to pull me out of my own home and send me across the map, battling armies, epidemics, and sadistic researchers. Do you know how happy I was before this whole ordeal began?

Voice: We are sure you were happy, but we would like to point out how chimerical your happiness was, since it was built on ignorance of the truth.

I: So what on earth could you possibly want from me? What did Sister Anita and Colonel Bouchet want from me? What did Lawrence Tribe want? What about the Feds—what did they want? I pay my taxes. Why would I give to you what you want when I wouldn't give them what they wanted?

Voice: We are different from them. They all wanted you to fail, and we want you to succeed.

I: Succeed at what? How am I going to succeed if I don't know who I am and what I'm supposed to be doing?

Voice: Bryan, that is the crux of the matter, isn't it? But it's a question you should direct to yourself, not to us. Look, we have seen the same chaos as you; we have witnessed tanks move against defenseless townspeople because of their religious convictions; we have seen plagues rage unchecked because of the deterioration of the medical system; we have watched as populations are made destitute and lives are destroyed. We are playing our part to wage against the apocalypse. Are you? Bryan, let me ask you, how are you going to succeed if you don't know who you are and what you're supposed to be doing?

I: Look, I don't believe you. I have drilled deep inside me and have found nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that would elevate me above the next person. Has it ever occurred to you that this mythical identity doesn't exist, and even if it did, it is not I? I'd love to snap my fingers and fix everything, but if you're looking for me to be a superman, then you're not playing your part because it's not going to happen. In fact, why don't you just pull over and let me out of the car, because it's your superstitions that have placed me in this position. Just pull over. Just pull over!

Voice:

There were no objections from Doctor Tarr and Professor Feather, and indeed the car decelerated and rolled to the shoulder alongside the roadway.

I opened my door and stepped out of the car. "Later," I said. Not content with such a dismissal, I walked to the front of the car, pressed my nose to the darkened window, and peered inside to spy the occupant. Only I saw none. I opened the driver's side door and the front seat was empty.

Bloody hell. Tarr & Feather must be steering the car remotely. I looked around the car for the remote control housing and found it attached to the steer-

ing column. I pried the box off and tossed it into the street. And now I had in my possession a car with a tank of hydrogen, and I knew exactly what I was going to do.

\* \* \* \*

It was morning when I reached Tijuana, many days later. I had abandoned the car along the sides of the railroad tracks in Colorado, and had taken a westbound train. When the train stopped in California, I hitchhiked south. My last ride dropped me off a thirty-minute walk from my flat, but I was so eager to get home that I shortened it to twenty.

When I reached my building I thumbed myself in. Who cares whose data sniffers I alerted, or how many Departments of Kissing My Arse would be at my doorstep. I wanted to be home, to take a long hot shower, and to call Char.

My apartment was largely unchanged. I had no plants or pets, nothing that would die in a month and greet me with its decomposed corpse when I returned. I undressed, left my clothes in a pile on the floor, and immersed myself in the shower's steamy jets. I could feel the miles wash off. In my head I constructed my telephone call with Char.

I dried myself in the vent. As I dressed I heard a crashing sound outside, and a number of voices shouting. I rushed to the window to look out, and saw a huge jet, much larger than a flier, blocking all the lanes in the street below. Then my door crashed in.

In burst several soldiers, heavily armed. Their rifles, of course, were trained on me, so I froze in place. I was a well-trained captive.

"It's secure," one of the soldiers spoke into a clip on his sleeve.

Neither soldiers nor I moved. They were waiting for something to happen next, so I waited, too. And then an older man walked through the shattered door-frame. He was dressed in a business suit, not a military uniform.

"Bryan," he announced, "I have been waiting for this meeting for a long time."

Of course I recognized him. His obsequious face decorated the worthless currency. He was the vice president of the United States.

"Wondering how I found you?" he asked.

"Thumbprint?" I replied, with another question. I held up my thumb.

"That's a facile consideration, Bryan. Of course we found you by your thumbprint. We'd been monitoring your home ever since you left. The real question, of course is how did we know it was *you* we were searching for?"

Great—another game theorist. “So how did you know?” I prompted.

“It was when you were kidnapped by the Aryan Nation that aroused my curiosity,” he replied. “I sent a few troops into their encampment to gauge how badly Bouchet wanted you, and when I saw he was mounting a full-scale defense, my curiosity intensified. I decided I must have a face-to-face interview with you, but you somehow managed to slip away.”

He strolled to my sofa and sat down beneath my favorite picture of Char. I was glad I had turned the picture off, because I didn’t want him looking at her or her looking on him.

“You showed up on our radar again when we detected your phone use in San Francisco,” he continued. “Once again I sent in a team, only this time it was a surgical team. However, you managed to elude them as well. It was only later that I learned that Lawrence Tribe, the leader of Earth Liberation, had taken you.

“Then I knew for sure it was you I wanted; but each time I tried to apprehend you, you were one step ahead. I lost you again, until your fingerprints were found on some surgical equipment in an investigation of a reported staff assault at a research clinic in South Carolina. How you had gotten from the West Coast to the East Coast undetected, I don’t know. I sent in troops again, but you were gone.”

“I still don’t understand why this convinced you I was who you looked for.”

“Look at this,” he said, brandishing his phone. It was a state-of-the art model, not the kind you could buy at Wal-Mart. He projected an image on the wall for us both to see. It was from a newsgroup: *alt.religion.christian.roman-catholic*.

Vice President: Read this. Sister Anita Rant and Father Merrel Bouchet were expelled from the Catholic Order of the Troubled Souls for heresy. They were excommunicating for practicing Albigenianism.

I: Which is?

Vice President: A heresy with roots in twelfth-century France whose followers believed that human flesh was corrupt, and abhorred food, material goods, and marriage. They also believed that Christ was an angel and not the Son of God.

I: So what? What’s the big deal in that?

Vice President: Look at this. [*The image on the wall changes.*] Cardinal Lawrence Tribe is recalled to the Vatican for preaching radical doctrines, namely that Christ is not coeternal with God, a form of Arianism, which is a heresy born in Alexandria, Egypt, in the fourth century. Tribe is excommunicated for preaching heresy.

I: Again, so what? Why do I care? What does this prove?

Vice President: Do you still deny it, Bryan?

I: Deny what?

Vice President: That you are a member of the Spanish Inquisition!

I: But I don't even speak Spanish!

Vice President: You *cannot* deny it. It is well known that the Church has resurrected the Spanish Inquisition in order to suppress heresy. The Vatican trains its inquisitors by imprinting on each one the face of a heresiarch. You are relentless, unstoppable agents that cannot be defended against until you have brought your heretic to confession. The Vatican injects inquisitors as sleepers into the world at large, and activates them when it is time to bring the heresiarch down. That is why Sister Anita and Father Bouchet feared you. That is why Lawrence Tribe feared you. They suspected you were an inquisitor and that they were your imprints. They plotted to kidnap you so they could keep you close by, to observe you.

I: Why the heck didn't they just confess and get it over with?

Vice President: Because heresiarchs do not abandon their "false" doctrines. If we abandoned our beliefs so quickly, we wouldn't be heresiarchs, would we? So they wanted to study you, to see if you would expose yourself. But in truth, you were hunting bigger game. This is what convinced me that you were hunting for me, and not them. Each time you left them, you left them unscathed. Had you subjected them to the confessional, they would have been changed. It destroys most women and men. They become blathering imbeciles. It was imperative that I see you face-to-face and apprehend whether it was truly I who was your game. I couldn't assassinate you outright, because what if I was wrong? I would have the false security that I had disabled my adversary, and I would still be in peril.

*Blah blah blah*, he was saying. Inexplicably, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the miniature windmill, the disk that Jake had given me. Almost by reflex I aimed it at the soldier next to me, and I saw it embed in his forehead, neatly bisecting his surprised eyes. As he toppled to the ground insensate, I wrested his rifle from his hands. Then my camera switched to the opposite side of the room, and the fallen soldier's rifle spun through the room like a compass point, mowing the other soldiers down.

I looked down at my feet. There lay the soldier, with my shiny metal disk protruding from the center of his temple. I pulled it out and wiped the blood on the man's uniform; then I placed the blade back in my pocket. The rifle was still in my hands, the barrel warm from spewing bullets. The vice president rose from his comfortable seat on my sofa, and headed abruptly to the door. I swung the stock of the rifle at the backside of his head and he fell, unconscious, to the ground. I

heaved his limp body over my shoulder and walked out the shattered doorframe. Take the elevator down; then step through the lobby into the daylight.

Passersby stared at me and the human tossed over my shoulder, but I didn't shrink from their gaze. I felt as powerful as an orangutan, as fearless as Grendel. Who would dare accost me? Who would be my match? I was omnipotent, a Chief Inquisitor. I had reached my apotheosis.

I descended the stairs that lead to the Underground, but avoided the turnstiles and chose a door that was easily overlooked. It led to another set of stairs that led ever farther down into the earth. Though it was dark I took the stairs two or three at a time. I opened more doors that only I had the strength to move, chose branches of a labyrinth that I alone knew the direction to. We traveled deep into the bowels of the earth, further away from the passages of men. Finally, we reached a chamber that was carved by subterranean movements instead of picks or equipment; I set the vice president's body onto a wooden bench and began to work.

\* \* \* \*

A man lies on a wooden bed; he is unclothed except for a sheet covering his organs. His feet are tethered to a wooden block at one end of the bed; his hands are equally restrained on the other. The rope is sinuous and rough, like cable wire; it abrades the man's wrists and ankles, which are matted with blood. His breath is exaggerated, as if he were inhaling glue rather than air. He struggles to inflate his rib cage; it does not expand and contract with the ease of reflex but with the labor of weightlifting. With each heavy exhalation, his flesh scrapes along the splintered wood, sloughing skin and hair while accreting shards of wood. His face is averted. I stand beside the wooden bed; you can only see my arms, clasped over my chest. The rest of me is obscured in shadow. What have you to confess? I ask the supine man.

Nothing! The vice president screams.

But he has much to confess, and it is my job to bring the salve of expiation to him.

On the rack, his body is as tight as a bowstring. Like a fisherman watching his line, I am aware of every vibration; he is my finely tuned instrument. My fellow inquisitors favor the modern devices of persuasion, but I am a practitioner of the rack.

I: Ferris Maximus, I am your inquisitor and this is your confession. Would you prefer the proceedings to be conducted in Latin or English?

Ferris: English.

I: Good, because my Latin is terrible. Would you like to hear the charges of heresy that have been lodged against you?

Ferris: No.

I: Well, I get to decide what's said, because you're in the rack and I control the lever. The charges are:

- You are a mendicant, sodomite, Dreyfusard, big-endian; you have mated a cormorant with a goat.
- You are an anarchist, catamite, flat-Earther, Keynesian, Onanist, pharisaic, sycophant, and mercantilist.
- You are trilobite, sextant, Corinthian, pointillist; you know not for whom the bell tolls, your verse is in duodecimal.
- You are a Pict, a dolomite, a micturant, gerund, and scintillist.

Do you retract these false doctrines to cleanse your soul?

Ferris: What if I could tell you a secret, a *profound* secret that matters most to every soul on this planet?

I: Even so. We are not here to trade *secrets*. We are here to expose your heterodoxy.

Ferris, whispering: I know who the antichrist is!

I: Don't we all know who the antichrist is? It is not a cipher. Who has plunged the world into chaos, and now works to conquer the world order he had destroyed?

Ferris: Yes, the antichrist is the man I serve, the president of the United States.

I: Even so. We are not here to contemplate his sins; we are here to contemplate yours. The time for his inquisition nears...

Ferris: You don't get it! You're awfully obtuse for an inquisitor.

I: You're not the first person to make that observation.

Ferris: My sins and the president's are inextricably tied. I have raised him up from nothing, and placed him in the seat of power.

I: Right, right, right. Have you heard me say that we need to focus on your heresies?

Ferris: Do you know what my heresy is? I have raised up the antichrist with the Church's most invidious heterodoxy. I have shown him the Second Book of Revelations!

I: The Second Book of what?



Ferris: The Second Book of Revelations. Oh ignorant man, the book was written in A.D. 97, during the reign of Domitian. Do you not know? The first Book of Revelations was so controversial that the Church at first refused to accept it as canon. When the apostle John wrote the first book, he infused it with metaphor and hyperbole, and it shocked and offended the early Christians. Do you truly believe all that nonsense about seals and beasts? So he wrote the Second Book of Revelations to decode the first. Surely you, as a cryptographer in your lay life, can appreciate how meaningless the first book would be without the second. It would be, let's say, apocryphal.

I: How did you find it, then?

Ferris: I was a Vatican archivist. I found the parchment in a bin of Hittite kitchenware in the Vatican's antiquities warehouse. I studied the document for years without understanding its meaning. You see, the second book is equally cryptic without the first. But one day while I was attending a symposium on the Four Horseman, a phrase from the first book struck me as complementary to a sentence from the second. I spent another two years spinning the two books together like a loom. I brought my findings to my superiors' attention, for the warnings were dire and imminent. A council was convened, and the Church concluded the second book was a counterfeit, written instead by an itinerant fishmonger from Thessalonica.

Let me ask you, Bryan, how would you react if a cryptographic algorithm you could prove with mathematical certainty was decreed by the Church to be heresy? These are not the days of Copernicus; surely Church doctrine must yield to science! I was livid, crazed, and irrational.

I: Why?

Ferris: Because either the Church as wrong or my findings were wrong, *and I knew my findings could not be wrong*. Thus the Church must be wrong. In the eyes of the Church I had committed this heresy; but in the eyes of God I committed a more abhorrent sin. I had in my head the blueprint for the apocalypse. Had I plucked out mine eyes and severed my tongue, I would have still burned in hell for my heresy; but I compounded the sin by taking a mere man and inflating him to be antichrist. I used the prophecies to raise up an obscure but unscrupulous politician, a Republican, to be the great enemy of God. Had I not intervened, he would never have succeeded in usurping the Constitution, then imposing martial law, and finally demolishing the world monetary order and bringing about the collapse of society.

Do you not think I hear the screams and lamentations of our victims in my sleep? Tighten the screws; I deserve the torment! [anguished screams]. Where is

my nepenthe, Bryan? Why does not my confession bring a balm to my soul? Is there relief in pain? Tighten the screws again! I want to feel my tendons shred! [more anguished screams] *My God! My God! Even the pain will not help! I am a heresiarch, the potentiator of the antichrist. Tighten the screws! Tighten the screws! Tighten the screws!*

His words devolve into preternatural howls. Not once had I tightened the screws; his torment was induced by the magnitude of his crimes. He sobs uncontrollably, and then utters two further words that had been lodged in the chasms of his lungs: *I confess!* Then he is silent. In a way, he is finally at peace, for his eyes betray no form of cognition. He drools, his limbs spasm involuntarily, he is inchoate.

Sometimes it is the role of the Inquisitor to drive the blade in through the hilt; other times a pinprick will do. The beauty of the rack, of course, is that it is calibrated according to how repentant the confessor is. In his head, Ferris did not seek me out to destroy me peremptorily; he sought me out to serve as the instrument of his confession. He had been trained by the Church to honor the laws of God; he broke those laws cognizant of the wages of his sins; and he knew damnation awaited him without confession.

So we serve for the glory of God; we serve for the redemption of mankind; and sometimes we serve for the salvation of monsters in the Spanish Inquisition.

## CHAPTER 12



# THE IRRESISTIBLE DEMISE

The papal jet awaited us. I lifted the tremulous body of Ferris over my shoulder and retraced my steps through the subterranean caverns until we emerged at the surface. Daylight had eroded to darkness. The jet touched ground, a door opened, and a walkway connected the craft with the soil. I carried Ferris up the ramp and was received by a handful of acolytes.

“Welcome, Brother,” they greeted me.

Attendants took charge of Ferris. “Don’t worry,” they assured me. “We will look after his corporeal self. His mind is gone, but his body will still endure sustenance and discharge.”

An acolyte brought me my inquisitorial robe and guided me to the jet’s chapel, where I confessed my own sins (lest an Inquisitor be sent for *me*). I gazed upward at the aerial figure who, at the same time, looked down upon me. *I—N—R—I*, I read. His rib cage was naught but bones, his abdomen spooned; brittle arms and legs were staked at the extremities. Great abs, I thought. Perhaps sit-ups *can* save the world. Bugger, yet another sin to confess.

Then I adjourned to the study, where I began to read the book of Isaiah to while away the time. The study was stocked with paper books, not digital reproductions, so my thoughts drifted to the generations of Inquisitors who had turned the very same pages before me. Out of curiosity I turned to the final book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelations. *Look at the trouble you’ve caused, Brother John*, I thought. I never did like metaphor and hyperbole, overrated liter-

ary effects. What was the blueprint for the apocalypse? What is to happen? Then blissful sleep overtook me, as the jet rocketed toward Rome.

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An acolyte awakened me. “We are in Vatican City, Excellency,” he said.

More attendants arrived to collect the vice president. They wheeled him down the walkway. Despite the fact that only a few hours had elapsed since I had last seen him, he was a different man. His flesh was pale and febrile; the muscles in his face had slackened, except for his eyes, which twitched uncontrollably. Was he at peace? It was out of my hands. Another man, also dressed in inquisitorial robes, stopped by the attendants to gaze into the face of the heretic.

Satisfied with Ferris’s condition, he approached me with both arms extended. “Welcome, my brother.” It was Cardinal Tiburon que Perseque Las Almas Inpenitentes, whom I had known since childhood as Tibby.

But in public amongst the cloth, I greeted him officiously. “Welcome, brother,” he said, clasping me on the back with his arms. I had not seen him in years. In fact, he no longer looked like my old friend; rather, he looked like someone who looked like my old friend. He still had the same air of amusement and diffidence as my old friend, though; although I could see he was no longer so assiduous about doing his abdominal work.

“Let us adjourn to the Chamber of Meditation,” he suggested. We walked down a corridor, away from the prying eyes and attentive ears of the acolytes. They were forbidden from entering the Inquisitors’ Chambers. Each room bore the name of a different sentiment—Reflection, Cogitation, Prayerful Colloquy. The Chamber of Meditation was dimly lit when we entered; nonetheless, you could see that it was overstocked with reliquaries and aged manuscripts. Tibby offered me a brandy and cigar, both of which I declined. While he prepared his drink I studied the tapestries that covered the walls, honoring the deeds of my predecessors, like Brother Gastón, who took confession from Robespierre, and Cardinal Pe, who presided over the breaking of the alleyway murderess of Hamburg. Of course, the penultimate Inquisitor, Torquemada, was celebrated in a massive tapestry that depicted his perhaps overzealous prosecution of the Jews of Spain.

“Come, see this,” Tibby remarked, lighting his cigar with a candle. He gestured to a spot on the wall where a tapestry I had not recognized was suspended. “Brother Bryan subdues the forces of the anti-Christ” read a plaque beneath the tapestry. And the threads of the tapestry revealed in triptych a yellow-haired stick

figure chained in a hole beneath the ground, then toiling amidst the sufferers in a plague city, and finally, stretching a pitiful wretch over a rack.

"How did you know about all this?" I asked.

"The Church has many agents, even in the land of the antichrist."

I pointed to the figure lying supine on the rack. "I just wish I had not broken him," said I.

"It was he who chose to defy God and the Church. He hardened his heart. Since he couldn't accept salvation with the mind of a scientist, God gave him the mind of a child."

"So be it," I said.

"So be it," he repeated.

"Tibby," I began, "why is it that I was sent out into the world with no memory of the Church, no memory of our Order, and no knowledge of my mission?"

"Bryan, you must understand that if you had pursued him as an Inquisitor, he would have found you out and crushed you with the full power of the federal government. It is not the Inquisitor's style to comport himself meekly; instead, he acts imperiously, with moral arrogance. We wanted to reveal you as an enigma, a question mark, so the heretic must needs seek you out and force you to affirm your identity."

"But how did you—"

"—suppress your memories? That was an artifact of our training. We didn't suppress your memories—you did. You simply switched off gray cells like this—" he snapped his fingers.

I jumped, as if the snap of his fingers would again bereave my memory. I probed my brain the way you search your body for gashes and breaks after a fall, and found the remembrance of my true imprint, my ode to joy, my girl from Ipanema, still bloomed.

He spotted my reaction, and sought to assuage me. "You can't suggest that we tampered with you, Bryan. The plot was yours; it was your machination. And the plan was perfect. No eyes had seen the vice president since his third term in office, more than a dozen years ago; he was ever wary of coups and assassination plots. We let it be known amongst the Church-in-exile that an Inquisitor was loosed; knowing the rumor would make it to Ferris's ears; and of course, the instant he learned of your imminence, he would have to uncover who the Inquisitor was."

"What about Sister Anita and Colonel Bouchet?" I asked. "What about Lawrence Tribe?"

“Our agents fed the clues to them, first. It is always true that each person thinks she or he is the subject of the Inquisition. The heresiarchs are a cohesive organism; when one member senses the immediacy of the Inquisition, all tremble. Ferris intercepted their communications, inferred dark meanings from their fears; you can imagine how your entrance into the drama excited his curiosity. He fed on the suspicions of the others; except he reasoned the Church would not send out an Inquisitor after such prosaic sinners when he, the enemy of God, remained at large. After all, he was the puppet-master of the antichrist. He knew instinctively that you came for him.

“You came under his radar when federal forces intercepted a soldier fleeing the Aryan enclave north of Sacramento. When agents interrogated him, the soldier would divulge nothing of Bouchet’s military position, but he did disclose the method of your arrival, and the colonel’s inordinate interest in you. He had no idea he was betraying you, of course. This came to Ferris’s attention, and Ferris immediately suspected you were the Inquisitor. Consequently, he sent federal troops to pierce the Aryan defenses in Sacramento. Your escape heightened his suspicions. You eluded him again in San Francisco, though others whom he mistook for you were not so fortunate. Then you were apprehended by Lawrence Tribe. By the time Ferris learned of your whereabouts and brought his forces to bear, you again escaped. We were notified by one of our agents, a member of the Church-in-exile that you had escaped from a reproduction center on the East Coast and in fact had absconded with the member’s car.

“Then you fell off the radar for weeks, until a hydrogen filling station in Colorado recorded the swipe of your thumbprint. Thereafter, a trail of electronic transactions led Ferris back to your flat in Tijuana, where he went to surprise you. As he followed you, we followed him. It was a cat-and-mouse game with several cats and no mice.”

“What’s the big deal, though? Why would anyone care if a fifteenth-century relic were in pursuit of him or her? Each of them had armies to stand against me.”

“You see, Bryan, the heretic has a special relationship with the Inquisitor. They loathe you, because you seek to demolish the world they have striven to build; yet they cannot resist you, for they know they do not have the will to stop themselves from opposing God, and it is only the Inquisitor who can smash their will, and draw forth their repentance.”

“So when do I go after *him*?”

Tibby paused. “After whom?”

“After the antichrist?”

"Bryan, you do *not* go after the antichrist. There is something else you don't know about Ferris Maximus." He drew closer to me so he could continue in a hushed tone. "Ferris refused to believe the Church's assertion that there was no Second Book of Revelations, yes?"

"Right," I said.

"Well, there *is* a Second Book of Revelations, only it's not the version that Ferris found."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Do you mean his confession was for naught?"

"His confession is authentic and loved by God even if the material aspects are questionable. Ferris still receives expiation. Bear in mind, he has served the Lord's purpose even as he thought he served the devil's.

"Centuries ago, the elders of the Church found the second manuscript written by John the Apostle. Of course, they realized this second manuscript was a key to the first. Many generations of our brothers toiled on this labor, and when they finally deciphered it, they realized they had a primer on how to destroy the world. So they carefully prepared a third manuscript, like the second, that deciphered the original, only they salted it with imperceptible flaws. An authority that possessed the actual cipher could defeat a principal acting on the strength of the counterfeit one. The elders hid the false version, knowing that someday it would be discovered, thus precipitating the arrival of the antichrist. The true version is the Church's most cherished secret."

"Since you know how to destroy him, then let us destroy him!" I urged.

"Remember, Bryan, there are prophecies that must be fulfilled. There is an order. If we destroyed today's antichrist before the divinations have come to fruition, it will give rise to another antichrist in another epoch when the Church may not be as watchful. What would have happened had Christ not been born in a stable, or worked as a carpenter? These events are ineluctable."

"But what of the people who are suffering now?"

"They suffer now to spare future generations from more damnable suffering. Doesn't man's capacity for cruelty increase with every passing generation? No dictator from the last century could have violated a people's DNA, yet our antichrist has. Imagine what horrors he will be capable of in another century's time. Be at peace, Bryan; now is the time for you to set aside the moral arrogance that comes with your office and surrender to the will of God."

I suppressed an urge to crash my fist into my old friend's face. How could he urge peace and surrender while the enemy of God ravaged the planet?

"Come," Tibby continued. "Our Father wishes to see you."

"To see me?"

“Yes. This is a great victory for the Church, and he wishes to commune with you.”

Tibby placed his arm around my shoulder, and together we walked to one of the bookshelves lining the walls. Tibby passed his hand before the bookshelf, and the ring on his finger triggered a series of gears, and the shelf swiveled outward. “Go, my brother,” he said. “Only, you must tell no one of what passes between you and our Father. Nothing of what you see or hear must leave this chamber.”

“No worries,” I said. I stepped through the opening, and as the partition sealed again I walked in the dark through the passageway, to see the pope.



## CHAPTER 13

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# THE END OF THE WORLD

I rocketed back to the States in the Vatican jet. The need for secrecy and machinations was over; no aircraft dared challenge a vessel flying under the papal aegis. As a Grand Inquisitor, I was given every luxury and accommodation (short of wiping my bum); but no amenity was more important to me than a telephone. The Vatican's tracking software was unparalleled.

Dawn, James, Mark, and Jenny had made it safely through the Mormon Underground. They were living in Salt Lake City, safe from the machinery of the antichrist. Dawn was still expecting, and now Jenny was as well. Another fecund weekend, I thought.

"OMG!" I exclaimed, "Where's Char?"

"Relax," Dawn assured me. "She's safe. She never left Las Vegas. She's been waiting for you to return this whole time."

She had never left. She had never left. I instructed the pilot to set course for Las Vegas. I wanted to pick up Char and fly with her to Utah, where we would rejoin our friends. Wasn't that the future she always envisioned for us? Living in the middle of the wilderness with no other diversion but our memory of unknowable lyrics...

Only I was not content, as Tibby had urged me, to let the apocalypse play itself out. I could not stop thinking about what I had witnessed. The first thing I wanted to do was to fly to Houston and rescue the little soldier who had joined the flagellants. Perhaps I could persuade the Mormons to send another care pack-

age to Malo Suerte, maybe more medical supplies. What about a raid on the research clinic in South Carolina? What about those welfare queens and their children? What about the Zero Child Policy? My list was endless.

I was sure my friends would help, too. They had all sacrificed for their principles, and what principle was higher than defeating the antichrist?

I suspected the Vatican was less concerned about saving humanity and more concerned about preserving the Church. Was that heresy? Besides, what if the Church was wrong about how the apocalypse would unfold? The problem with schemes and conspiracies was that they often undid the plotter. Who would know better than a member of the Spanish Inquisition?

To those of you who are still trapped in the clutches of the antichrist, I promise you will find us, clad in white dress shirts and black ties, cycling door to door, traveling in pairs, the agents of the Mormon resistance.

Within an hour, we entered airspace over Nevada. Showing the pilot where to land was dead easy—you couldn't ask for a better landmark than the Hoover Dam. He set the jet down beside the stern bookends and lowered the ramp. "Can you pick us up in an hour?" I asked.

"Yes, Excellency," he replied; then he lifted the jet off the ground and vanished into the sky.

Char was waiting for me at the cleft in the dam.

It was her image that had buoyed and sustained me through countless adversities, yet as my eyes absorb her, she is more wonderful, more lovely, more transcendent than my simple reconstruction.

Instantly I see how wrong I was in the moments I doubted you, and in the moments I relied on you, I see your reservoirs of strength were infinitely more deep. As you brush the hair from your eyes I see the fingers I longed to kiss, the cheeks I longed to caress, the lips I longed to press to mine. Your eyes suffuse with water, and so do mine.

How could it be the end of the world if such love survives?

Men have empires; nations have tyrants; the earth has pestilence and disasters. These are vapors to us. We have but one thing, and it lasts forever. Praise God.

## A P P E N D I X



The postcard...

Have I told you I love you today? Have I told you how wonderful you are?  
Have I run my fingers through your hair, have I touched my fingertips to  
your face, have I held you close to my chest?

Have I told you how you make me feel? That you make me laugh out loud  
with happiness, that you make me feel at peace, you give me a sense of  
worth?

Have we walked along the beach hand in hand today? Have we written “I  
love you” notes to each other, or called each other to say “I miss you. When  
are you coming home?”

Have you told me how God put us together; how we were meant for each  
other, how we are inseparable?

Have we told each other “I love you” at the same precise moment, your  
words overlapping mine...

Have we wrapped our arms around each other while the world spun around us, mindless of time, mindless of place, mindless of all but one boy and one girl and one timeless moment?

If not, then today has never been.



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